I Am To See To It (that I do not lose you)
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by The_Ship_Pirate

Summary

"'Course I'm okay." Neil smiled peculiarly. "Tonight's the night."
"What night?"
He laughed, staring absurdly. "The play. The play is tonight."
"It is?"
"What's gotten into you, Todd?" He felt along his forehead for a fever he wouldn't find.
Todd swallowed and started to bring himself off the floor. "Just had a weird dream, I guess."

OR my timeloop fic where Todd gets stuck reliving the night of the play until he can save Neil

Notes

HIIIIII LOVELIES

WELCOME TO THE MEATLOOP
This was kind of a crack idea that spiraled out of control and became serious, but I'm having a lot of fun with it and the target audience is me, my girlfriend (hiiiii Jenn muah), the four roommates I got obsessed with DPS, and my two long distance best friends that I love more than life (Ayla, Karlee, my ladies) and you guys just get to see it. So congratulations!

On par with canon, Neil's suicide is referenced repeatedly and in one case described graphically and somewhat gory. I'll add a trigger warning to the chapter and the quotes so you can skip it in the notes. Todd is also vomiting all time which I did not intend to do, it just sort of happened, so if that will bother you, please please please take care of yourself.

Anyway I love you all and shout out to Tay who has listened to me anguish over this for literal days straight and helped me map out the outline.

xxx The Pirate

See the end of the work for more notes

The Restless Sink in Their Beds, They Fitfully Sleep

Todd was standing behind Pitts when the car drove off.

Which meant he didn't really see Neil after they'd initially brushed shoulders trying to push through the theater doors. The whole thing felt oddly final, like suddenly a massive wedge had been jammed between whatever friendship he'd managed to form with him, like he had gotten up on that stage and never come back.

Knox hadn't been with them when Mr. Perry had taken Neil. He'd been behind in the crowd with Chris. He didn't know what had happened, he hadn't felt the jarring heat of Charlie's reluctant confrontation.

"She kissed me!" He cried, throwing himself over Meeks and Charlie. He grinned expectantly, waiting for the cheers of approval and joined excitement, but was met with only solemnity.

"Good on you, Knoxious," Charlie murmured absently.

The rest of the night felt mechanical. They all piled into the car and Keating drove them home in silence. No one tried to force conversation. Neil had set this silence for them, and no one dared disrespect it.

"I'm going to bed," Cameron said decisively and dipped into the bathroom. The others stood in the hall, great hulking teenage forms of some unidentifiable grief. Eventually, Pitts sighed and followed him.

Knox offered weakly, "I'm gonna… find something to eat."

Charlie nodded, but neither of them moved.

Todd stood in the doorway of his and Neil's room. The paint in the door frame had started

to peel around the clasp, weathered from years of careless boys scraping the stopper across it. Todd picked at it nervously, the stiff streaks catching under his nails and digging into his skin.

"What are you gonna do?" Meeks asked him.

Truth be told, he wanted to go with Knox and Charlie, be anywhere but in that room. It felt insurmountable without Neil, dark and cold and inhabitable, and he didn't want to be shut up in there with the empty bed. The aching altar of the Perry family sins.

"Let's go." Todd wasn't even sure who said it. Maybe no one did, and they managed to think it at the same time.

The kitchens were empty. It was well past midnight at this point, and the staff had all retired for the night. Knox and Meeks scrounged up some leftover meatballs from the night before and spread the dishes along the counter. Charlie found some forks, and they all stood in silence, hunched over, eating cold meatballs in the dark.

Charlie, the way he always did when they were served anything that came in a unit larger than bite-size, jammed an entire meatball in his mouth. His jaw strained to chew it until he inhaled wrong and choked, coughing and spluttering. He grabbed Todd, and hit his chest in desperation.

Meeks pounded on his back and he hacked enough to dislodge it, before laying his head on the counter in defeat.

They didn't eat much after that.

Todd and Meeks shared a sink to brush their teeth. The water was freezing this late at night, from the winter. Usually, the younger boys had already been through and the water had had time to warm, but it had been hours since they had gone to sleep.

Meeks' hands were shaking- Todd had noticed how the fork had trembled against the dishes when he held it- and when he squeezed the toothpaste it globbed out uncomfortably and splattered against the front of his robe. He groaned and scraped it off, flinging it into the sink and trying to rinse it down, but the spot was left on the flannel.

Todd couldn't stop looking at it.

" *Todd… Todd."*

He didn't really wake up, just uncurled from the warmth of his bed enough to see Charlie. His brain was still asleep, didn't think it through, just knew that if it was Charlie, it couldn't matter all that much.

“Todd…”

The cold air in the room was too thin to breathe. The tears trailing down Charlie’s face, the tears dripping down Meeks’ chin. Knox’s dejected lean on the door.

“ *Neil’s dead.”*

It was hardly a conscious thought to make it into the snow. It flooded into his slippers, soaking through his socks against his cold feet. His hands must’ve been cold too, but his whole body was too numb to notice.

Everything he did wasn’t him- just some immediate mechanism within his body. It wasn’t until the thought really reached him, like the cold had been fighting it off all this time but it was too overpowering to completely subdue.

Neil’s dead.

Todd’s stomach lurched. He gagged involuntarily. How could *Neil* be *dead?* Neil?! *Dead?!* It was almost impossible to comprehend. But it felt real. He’d left that night for the play and they’d never seen him again. Puck was the ghost of a boy that had already made up his mind. And he would haunt them forever.

Todd’s stomach rolled and he keeled over, bile and undigested meatball from the night before spilling from his mouth and tarnishing the ivory snow. He fell to his knees, rocking with waves of discomfort, spitting out the taste of his grief.

The poets ran to him, grabbed him, to stop him from falling over in his own sick and rotting there. Knox buried his face in Todd’s back, grabbing him around the waist, and Charlie’s icy fingers pushed the clean snow to his mouth, purging the acid for only a moment, the way vomiting had only quelled his internal agony for barely a second. He wanted his hands there on his face, freezing against his hot lips and burning tears, to help stabilize him, but Charlie pulled away to help Meeks keep him upright, even against the weight of Knox against his spine.

It was his father, it was his father, it was his father!

He wouldn’t do this, he wouldn’t do this, it was his father.

Todd felt violently ill, worse than the time his appendix had burst, like

if he didn't throw up until he could hold his stomach, he was going to die.

He managed to scramble away from the poets, to tumble off through the snow like if he ran fast enough, he could get away from this situation, from this news, this reality.

This world without Neil.

His shoes slid on the snow, and he ruined the perfect stillness of the morning with his scream, and it still wasn't enough. If Neil was gone, the sun shouldn't have risen.

The wet grass turned to wood beneath his feet, and he nearly crawled to the end of the dock, reaching and reaching for the end, for something to save him. He was sure he would tumble end over and end and fall right through the frozen surface to be boiled in the subzero lake and it would hurt, but at least he would feel the same outside as he did inside. Even drowning wouldn't hurt this badly.

But as he reached for the water, knees knocking on wood, he never met the surface of the ice.

"Neil!" Todd jolted awake, grasping at his blankets like it was the malleable snow he was expecting, and fell right out of bed and onto his back on the wood floor.

Neil startled at both his name and the clattering as he hit the ground, crying out, "Jesus, Todd!" and throwing his half-knotted tie over his shoulder. He rushed to grab Todd, who stared at him like he was some combination of a spector and a god and gasped for breath.

"Are you okay?"

Todd's sight darted frantically across the room, looking for some flaw, some disconnect to prove this was a dream. But the room looked exactly as it always had, and Neil was watching him like he had lost his mind.

"Okay, you're scaring me."

"You're okay?" Todd choked. He reached out and held the side of Neil's face with one hand, and grabbed his arm with the other. He was

afraid that he might disappear at the touch, but he didn't. He remained solid and tangible under Todd's grasp.

"'Course I'm okay." Neil smiled peculiarly. "Tonight's the night."

"What night?"

He laughed, staring absurdly. "The play. The play is tonight."

"It is?"

"What's gotten into you, Todd?" He felt along his forehead for a fever he wouldn't find.

Todd swallowed and started to bring himself off the floor. "Just had a weird dream, I guess."

The deja vu was insufferable. Everything Todd said, heard, did- felt like it already had been. He had sausage and oatmeal at breakfast, which they always had on Tuesdays, because it *was* Tuesday, although he could've sworn he had sausage and oatmeal *yesterday* (which made no sense because they had bacon, eggs, and toast on Mondays) and he listened to Charlie's story about the first time he broke his arm. Which he was sure he had heard (but Charlie only had about eight good stories so he certainly could've heard it before).

Cameron burst a test tube during laboratory, which had happened yesterday, he swore, but no one seemed too put out, and Dr. Leason- as he was bandaging the huge angry welt on his hand in gauze- even said it was the first time Cameron had made that sort of mistake.

He sat through Keating's lesson on music, with the sleep mask pulled over his eyes, but he couldn't think about *music* when he was having the weirdest day of his life. He'd thought about music during the lesson yesterday. He remembered specifically thinking about Camille Saint-Saens. But no one else remembered.

Spaz tripped on the stairs on the way to dinner. Todd remembered it as it was happening, and tried to catch him as he fell, but he was just a second too late, and Spaz totally ate it, managing even to crush his own glasses. Neil and Charlie pulled him to his feet and he pushed the broken glasses up his nose.

Knox stayed behind on the way to the play because Chris had broken

in.

Charlie spoke too loud and tried to stand up when Neil got on stage.

Todd shifted in his seat. Anxiety had started to burrow into the pit of his stomach and he could hardly sit still.

Keating watched him tense and shot him a questioning look, that he ignored. What was he supposed to say? *I think Neil's going to kill himself tonight. I had a dream about it.*

Surely, that would go over well.

As they filed out of the theater, Neil and Todd brushed shoulders.

"You were incredible," Todd told him earnestly, and despite the dampening presence of his angry father, Neil smiled.

Tonight, Todd got around Pitts. He watched Neil half-smile at Keating's praise and climb in the car miserably, and he watched Charlie cry in outrage.

Todd already felt sick. It was happening again. Word for word. But it wasn't like his dream, because he was standing in front of Pitts now, so it was different. It wasn't a dream.

They stood there in silence as Mr. Perry's car disappeared down the road.

"She kissed me!" Knox laughed, arms around Charlie and Meeks.

"Good on you, Knoxious," Charlie murmured absently.

The paint hadn't been peeled.

There was a spot, a place in the door frame where a drip of paint had hardened and Todd had peeled it off yesterday. Except he was back in the doorway, and he was peeling the same place. It came off with the same difficulty, and the piece around it stuck under his nail and hurt his skin.

"I'm going to bed."

"I'm gonna… find something to eat."

“What are you gonna do?” Meeks asked.

He motioned vaguely toward Charlie and Knox. His stomach was perfectly upset, but he was hoping he could fix it if he ate.

The four of them slipped through the dark into the kitchens. The meatballs made it in front of them, and Todd stabbed his fork in to pull off a piece. He managed to stomach it and went for another because he really should eat.

Charlie jammed his fork into one of the whole ones and shoved it into his mouth, distending his jaw. Todd watched him try to choke it down, until it met with his epiglottis and he gagged. He grasped Todd’s arm and hit his chest with the heel of his hand. Meeks punched his back and dislodged it.

Todd wasn’t hungry anymore.

The sink water was ice and Meeks gripped his toothbrush like he would drop it if his knuckles weren’t white. He fumbled with the toothpaste and accidentally forced out a wad that tripped down the fibers of his robe. He groaned, and scooped it into the sink.

Todd stared at the wet spot.

Todd didn’t mean to go to sleep. He laid awake for hours, just staring at the ceiling and worrying, trying very hard to not look at Neil’s empty bed at all costs. His plan was to stay up all night, because then he couldn’t dream, and he wouldn’t have a repeat of that horrid nightmare.

But he did fall asleep, because next thing he knew, he was being shaken awake. He tried to brush it off- he had barely slept at all and he hadn’t had the nightmare again, thankfully. But he realized it was Charlie and immediately sat up.

“What’s wrong?”

The poets stood in the doorway in various stages of disarray and agony.

Charlie swallowed. *“Neil’s dead.”*

No.

Todd had snow in his shoes before he could comprehend it. He was running, or at least trying to, before the sickness in him came tearing from his mouth. Meatball and acid in the snow.

Knox's face to his shoulder was familiar and comforting but not enough. Meeks tight hold on his arm. Charlie’s freezing fingers shoveling snow against Todd’s wet mouth.

The snow tasted good, and he wanted to hold it in his mouth, to make him feel better, but it wouldn’t last, just like any semblance of normalcy.

So he clawed himself free and rolled through the snow like a madman to get to the dock. To meet the wood and the icy water, and he screamed Neil’s name the whole while.

If he could just touch the water…

I and This Mystery, Here We Stand

Chapter Notes

HIIIII i'm back!

I forgot to mention- this entire fic is based solely on that one deleted scene where Gale Hansen jams an ENTIRE meatball in his mouth and it's literally agonizing to watch. It's endlessly funny to me so here we are.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todd gasped awake.

Neil looked over in surprise at the sound of him clawing at his sheets and cocked an eyebrow. “You okay?”

“What day is it?”

Neil crossed his tie over and tucked it through. “Tuesday. Tonight’s-”

“The play.” Todd sat up. “No, yesterday was the play.”

Neil laughed absurdly. “No, it wasn’t.”

Todd climbed out of bed and wrenched open the door. There, on the doorframe was the unpeeled glob of white paint. Untouched, even though Todd could perfectly recall the way it felt under his nail.

“No,” He whispered desperately.

He tore down the hall and flung himself into Pitts and Meeks room. They both cried out, somewhat in surprise, somewhat in outrage- Pitts was standing there in his boxers, trying to trip into his slacks. Todd hardly noticed, digging through Meeks' closet.

“What are you doing?”

Neil, who had followed Todd of course, and remained standing in the doorway, shrugged in confusion.

Todd found the flannel robe and pulled it into the light from the window, stretching the lapel. No toothpaste stain. He flung it back into the closet and continued back the way he’d come. Neil and Meeks stared at each other, then trailed after him.

Todd nearly knocked into Spaz, who quickly righted himself and shoved his glasses back up his nose. Unbroken and level on his face, even though he'd stepped on them last night.

He pounded on the door across the hall.

Charlie yanked it open "What are you-"

Todd shoved past him to where Cameron was putting on his shoes.

"Show me your hands."

He looked at Todd like the demand personally offended him, but held up his hands, shooting a look to Neil, Meeks, and Charlie all watching Todd examine them.

No bandages. No burns.

Todd's mouth went dry.

"What's gotten into you?" Neil laughed.

Todd didn't return his bemused grin. "Just a… bad dream."

Todd pushed his oatmeal around in the bowl but didn't eat it. Charlie, through a mouthful, was regaling the story of his broken arm *again,* but Neil wasn't listening this time around, he was staring at Todd, burning holes in the side of Todd's head that he ached to itch.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Fine," Todd mumbled. What was he supposed to say? *I've already lived today- twice- which I know is impossible, but it's happening anyway and also it ends with your tragic and untimely death? It's making me so sick I can hardly stand it?*

He had to figure out what the hell was going on.

In laboratory, Todd watched Cameron's experiment. "It's getting too hot," he said exhaustedly. "It's…"

Too late. Cameron's test tube exploded. It burned his hand. Dr. Leason bandaged it with the commentary that "he'd never done anything like this before."

He pulled the sleep mask over his eyes and laid his head on the desk, cushioned by his arms. Keating was still giving instructions, but it's not like it wasn't anything he hadn't heard before.

Okay, what did he know?

Some things could be established. It was Tuesday, December 15th, 1959 for the third time. Whatever he'd done yesterday, hadn't crossed over with him. It was exactly like it was the first time he woke up on the 15th. No one else seemed to notice that it was the third time, either, which meant they were reset too. The day began when he woke up on the 15th and ended the morning of the 16th when he ran to the end of the dock. Altogether, it was probably only about 22 hours, but as long as he stayed in the loop, it was… infinite.

Well, these were patterns. He'd have to run it again to see if today went exactly the same, and then he could start to make decisions about what he was going to do.

"Todd, are you alright?"

He lifted his head and peeled back the sleep mask, blinking blearily against the light refracted off the snow streaming through the windows. Keating was looking down at him, not quite frowning, with some indecipherable look of worry.

"'M fine," Todd murmured.

"Are you?"

Todd looked around the classroom. Class was over, and everyone else had left, even Neil, who always waited for Todd, and he got the sinking feeling that Neil had said something to Keating about him acting weird.

"I'm…" He fidgeted with the band of the sleep mask. "I think…"

Keating sat on the empty desk next to him, leaning in with his chin propped on his hand. He waited, even as Todd struggled to come up with any words that made sense without telling the truth and sounding absolutely insane.

Because this was batshit crazy and he knew it. He knew it couldn't be real because there was no way it could happen. No one lives the same day every day.

“I think I’m going crazy.”

Keating laughed softly. “High school does that to a boy.”

Todd laughed too, awkwardly. “No, like, really crazy. I… I don’t know what to do.” He shook his head dismissively. “It’s fine. I’ll figure it out.” He scrambled to pack up his things so he could get out of this conversation.

“Todd.”

He paused, refusing to look up.

“I have something, I think you may be interested in.”

He crossed over to the bookshelves in his office and retrieved a tattered, green book with no defining marks sans a gold-embedded inscription of a laurel wreath. The pages had yellowed, and there was water damage that bowed the last half, but it looked sacred the way he held it.

He returned to the desk and thumbed open the book like he knew it so well he wouldn’t have to think. “It’s Whitman,” He explained. “My grandfather gave it to me when I was a boy and I thought it was pointless. But when I was older- your age- it was like the bible to me. I read through it for answers, guidance, comfort. That’s what poetry is for.”

Todd looked over in morbid curiosity. He had yet to hear a Whitman quote that didn’t invoke something in him, and he could use all those things: answers, guidance, comfort.

“ *This is what you shall do…”* Keating read. “ *Dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes.”* He met Todd’s sight conspiratorially. *“And in every motion and joint of your body.”*

Todd blinked stupidly.

Keating elaborated. “Because, the things you do matter, Todd. But don’t let that scare you, let it inspire you.”

Todd nodded, although he didn’t understand what he was supposed to take from that. Well, no, he knew it was a sign or something from the universe that he needed to change the loop, but he was more trying to

figure out what had inspired Mr. Keating to deliver the message to him.

He scooped up his books and started to leave, but not before Keating set the Whitman book on the top of his stack. Todd thanked him softly and trailed out into the hall after the rest of the boys.

On the way to dinner, Spaz tripped on the stairs. Todd reached out in the seconds before it happened and managed to catch him, just under the arms, and haul him to his feet. His glasses didn't even fall from his face.

"Thanks!" He gasped.

"Hey, good one," Charlie grinned, clasping his shoulder.

Todd nodded shyly.

Puck was glowing tonight.

Todd realized nothing must've really changed about Neil, he was the same as he had been the night before and the night before that, but he really was stunning. Maybe Todd had just changed to appreciate him more.

When the play ended, Todd was the first one to rush out to meet Neil as he trailed behind his father into the snow. "You were incredible."

Neil smiled, the way he did when it was just the two of them, but didn't say anything, turning miserably to face his father's shoulders.

"Don't go with him," Todd said suddenly. "Come on, we can get lost in the crowd."

For a moment, hope flickered on Neil's face and he did step closer to Todd, but in the next second his father looked over his shoulder to see if he was still behind him, and Neil shook his head. "I can't." He mumbled.

"I know," Todd whispered back. Just so Neil wouldn't feel like he was letting Todd down too.

That was the whole problem with this stupid time loop. Yeah, logically Todd was supposed to do something to change the outcome, but that wasn't possible. It was Todd. Yeah, he made decisions and

they impacted people, but not *that* much. He was *just* Todd. Worth $5.98 and not a cent more. It was Neil that had to change, and Todd couldn't do that for him.

He watched the car leave, watched Neil disappear into the night another time.

"She kissed me!" Knox's laugh was loud and out of place.

"Good on you, Knoxious."

Todd really didn't eat all day, which is why- when he found himself in the kitchens with the others again- he ate the meatballs. He leaned in next to Knox, slicing open one of the balls and bringing it to his mouth. He'd eaten more meatballs in the last- well *day*- than he had in all his life prior to Welton, and he wasn't sure he liked them enough to eat them ever again, but that was all the food they had.

Charlie inhaled his, and grasped Todd's arm, starting to cough. Todd punched him in the back.

Meeks' toothpaste gelled out onto his rob. He groaned and lobbed it off, rinsing his hand with the ice water.

"Can I sleep in your room?"

Charlie cocked an eyebrow. "Why?"

Todd shrugged. "I don't want to be in there alone."

"There's not room in my bed and Cameron's probably already asleep."

"I'll sleep on the floor."

Charlie's lip quirked with the start of a smirk, but he didn't complete it. "Yeah, okay, suit yourself."

The floor was cold, which wasn't really any surprise because every part of Welton was cold, but it was nice to be somewhere else anyway. He'd be back in his bed soon enough.

Dr. Hager came to wake Charlie, to tell him what had happened. *"Your friend Neil passed last night."*

Todd was turned on his side, pretending to be asleep, when he

choked, “What do you mean? What happened?”

“Complications from a bullet wound.” Right, of course. Dr. Hager said it like it was no matter.

“His father *shot him?”*

“No! No, absolutely not.”

Todd could hear the moment Charlie realized. *“He shot himself.”*

Charlie’s first few sobs were almost silent, and it wasn’t until Dr. Hager crouched to wake him, that Todd heard the wetness in his voice. “Let him sleep. I’ll tell him in a minute.”

Cameron woke up at the sound of Meeks and Pitts coming in to stare at Charlie- that’s where Dr. Hager had gone next- all of them frozen with shock. Pitts offered to get Knox, and Meeks scrambled into Charlie’s bed to hold him while they cried.

“What’s goin’ on?” Cameron slurred, swatting the sleep from his eyes.

“Neil’s dead,” Meeks breathed, and Charlie’s cries hitched and relapsed, as he tried to bury himself deeper into Meeks’ chest.

Todd could hardly stand it. The tears came before he could stop them, and then he was climbing up to join them, sobbing, “I heard, I heard.”

Charlie only sat up when Knox pulled on him and they crashed into each other blindly, like every sense of direction and balance had been disrupted. All of them, huddled there in Charlie’s room, sobbing.

Cameron didn’t leave his bed, although he sat up, and Todd was furious. How could he not care, how could he not grieve with them? Neil was their *friend.*

But Cameron hadn’t been there the other times either. He hadn’t come to Todd’s room like a carefully orchestrated intervention to break the news, hadn’t followed his funeral procession out into the snow.

Todd wanted to hate him, to hurt him for not being with them. For not mourning Neil the way he was meant to, the way Neil deserved. But he knew, somewhere in him- that Cameron *was* grieving. That was the most horrid part. That even stone-faced, bootlicking Cameron was suffering in this too.

Todd walked out to the snow himself this time, and when he vomited,

he pushed snow into his own mouth, just to get the taste, but it wasn't the same as when Charlie did it, with his desperate, frantic love.

He ran down the dock.

Chapter End Notes

Kisses my lovelies!!

A Chance To Try Again After A Mistake

The paint was unpeeled. Meeks' robe was clean as he tripped to the bathroom. Charlie told the broken arm story.

Todd watched Cameron's test tube glow over the Bunsen burner. Part of him was still angry- albeit, irrationally- and he rationalized that this would've happened even if he wasn't in the loop, so it wasn't his fault.

The glass exploded, and Cameron's hand burned. Dr. Leason cleaned and wrapped it. "You've never done anything like this before."

Todd's vengeance was satisfied.

Todd looked down at the green Whitman book as Keating added it to the stack. He'd given him the same speech this time around, although it had been due less to Neil's insistence and more to Todd actively fishing for it.

He had hoped that if he heard it again, he would know what Keating meant, that he could use it; no such luck.

He made it halfway to the door from his desk before he turned back around.

"I still don't understand."

Keating smiled patiently. "Whitman was… different. As am I. As, I believe, are you. And when you're different, you start to feel like you're alone in the world. But it isn't true. If the Whitmans and Keatings and Andersons can look out for each other, we won't have to be alone."

"Right."

Todd was more confused now than he had been before.

The Whitman book was driving him crazy. He'd left it on his desk with the rest of his textbooks under the pretense that he didn't have any time for light reading. Which was ironic, and he knew it, given that he had all the time he would ever need.

But Keating had said it was like the bible, and the bible gives you answers, so why wouldn't the Whitman book? It actually made more sense, because Todd didn't believe in the bible, but he had sort of based his year around the teachings of Whitman.

He climbed across the bed to retrieve it and flipped through dumbly because he wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for. He settled on closing his eyes and opening it to a random page.

I like the scientific spirit—the holding off, the being sure but not too sure, the willingness to surrender ideas when the evidence is against them: this is ultimately fine—it always keeps the way beyond open—always gives life, thought, affection, the whole man, a chance to try over again after a mistake—after a wrong guess.

Todd blinked. Okay. Yeah, he could work with that.

A chance to try over again after a mistake- after a wrong guess.

That's what this was. He'd somehow gotten into this inexplicable situation, and this was the opportunity it was presenting him.

And actually, this gave him a roundabout idea. He needed to approach this more scientifically. He wasn't going to get anywhere from running about like a madman and vomiting meatballs- he needed to come up with a method.

Todd tore open the desk and pulled out a stack of paper. He needed to get out the information he had and arrange it in a way that made sense and simultaneously took away the burden of having to keep it locked up in his spinning head.

He found a pen and started to write December 15, 1959, but stopped.

The paint was back. The robe was clean. Which meant he could go to all this work to write it down, but he would have it for the next 13 odd hours, and then it would be like he'd never done it all.

He unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled them up over his elbows, staring down at the pale length of his forearm.

Todd traded the ballpoint pen for a felt tip one and, on the firm surface of his wrist, wrote *6:00 am.*

That's when the day started, on December 15th. When everyone was getting up and getting dressed for breakfast.

Breakfast he wrote below that, and then *(C arm)*

His arm really wasn't big enough for details. But repeated events had to be remembered because those were the ones he had to manipulate. The ones that didn't work together the first time.

He mapped out the rest of his schedule, including, in a blue pen instead of black, the talk with Keating. It had happened twice now, and even though it didn't happen in the original loop, it felt like it needed mentioning. He only had about an inch and a half of skin left until the crook of his elbow, so he added in *Neil leaves 4 pm.*

Now it was trickier. The events became less structured, less significant. *And* he was trying to write up his arm, but his sleeve wouldn't go up any higher, and try as he might, he couldn't write on his right forearm with his left hand.

Thank God it was winter.

He pulled his leg up, ankle flush with his knee, and rolled up the leg of his pants. Pulling the muscle of his calf tight, he started to write down it.

Spaz trips

Dinner

Free hour/release

Play prep

C gets red

Chris arrives

And so on, every minute detail he could think could be relevant. It was hard to decipher which conversations were important, which actions could have disastrous effects. But just as he was making it to his ankle, he finished off with *Dock*

Hm. That needed to be tested. Did the loop really end at 4:30 when he happened to run down the dock, or did it end just because he *did* run down the dock?

So that was his next list. He traded legs and started to write himself a to-do list.

Dock early

Dock late

That was as far as he got. He needed to mess around at the theater tonight to see what events *could* be messed with. There was just so much he didn't know.

"What are you doing?"

Todd startled more at Neil's hand on his shoulder than his voice. He felt inexplicably guilty, like he'd been caught doing something he absolutely should not have been.

"I, uh…" Todd looked over his shoulder and the words died.

This moment had never happened before. Usually, Todd was with the poets in the study hall when Neil went to get dressed for the play. But here was Neil, with Todd to witness it, backlit with the setting sun to outline him in some holy radiance. It was like he was appearing to Todd in the way the idea of him planted itself. The softness of his face, the depth of his eyes.

Todd's lips parted with the start of something, torn between *You're so beautiful* and its joint thought *How could you hurt yourself?* but nothing came out.

Neil smiled secretly. "What?"

"I can't wait to see you tonight," Todd managed. "You're gonna be so good, I know it."

He looked away bashfully. "Well… wish me luck."

"You don't need it."

Neil scrunched his nose in a soft yawp, threw his bag over his shoulder, and tapped the side of Todd's neck as he passed behind him toward the door.

In the silence that followed the clasp, Todd rested his forehead on the edge of his desk in exhaustion.

He *had* to save him.

Todd felt like he was casing the poor place.

Every time someone moved he looked to see who it was, who it affected. It was like all of his senses had been heightened and his brain wasn't spinning fast enough to keep up. For a second, he even kicked himself for not bringing his pen with him to take notes, then rationalized that with the idea that it would be absolutely ridiculous if he pulled up his pant leg and started writing on his calf randomly.

There was a lady a few rows over that kept sneezing, and it was driving him absolutely crazy. A kid a few rows up that had discovered the spring in the theater seats and was sitting on the folded bit to bounce down with her weight over and over again. There was a group of boys- brothers- behind him that were talking absurdly loud about a television program. A man that smelled way too much like cigarettes.

The good news was, while meatballs and oatmeal and even Meeks' toothpaste had pretty quickly been ruined for him, Todd had yet to get tired of Puck. He laughed at the same jokes, at Neil's charisma, at the outlandish plot.

He felt Mr. Perry come through the doors like some kind of toxic fog. Watched Neil's sight move from the row of his friends to the darkness at the back of the theater. Pinpointed the moment the idea got lodged in Neil's head.

The theater cleared out, and for once, Todd lingered. Meeks looked back with a sort of questioning look and Todd nodded vaguely toward Neil, and that was as much protest as anyone put up.

When Neil came through the curtains, he grinned. Hopefully. Like maybe he had misread his father's face. Then he saw Todd, and he *beamed.*

Todd returned it, running to meet him at the stairs. "Oh, you were great! You were so wonderful, so-" He interrupted himself to grab him and Neil laughed against his shoulder, returning the hug.

"Thank you, thank you! I could see you mouthing my lines the whole time, I swear, next show, I'll get you a crew job and you can come-"

"Neil."

Whatever mirth transpired between the boys vaporized. They both turned to look at Mr. Perry and Neil suddenly looked very much like he wanted to be sick.

I'd shove snow in your mouth, Todd thought, almost like it was a joke. Then *he* wanted to be sick when he realized *Neil wouldn't get it.*

"It's time to go home."

He nodded solemnly, turning to follow his father like a beaten dog, offering a hopeless shrug Todd's way in explanation.

Todd followed him. The window was closing. The time to say the right thing, change the outcome. The words tumbled out without grace or preamble. "You're so good, Neil. You have so much ahead of you. Everyone needs to see you, you'll change lives. You're so important. You have no idea. You matter so much, and there's going to be a chance for you to learn it."

Neil swallowed thickly, nervously. *"I have to go home."*

"I know, but… just be careful, okay?"

Todd already knew it didn't work. It all fell flat between them, like a recording of a conversation that you already know the ending of. Oh, he knew how it ended. *Neil's dead.*

"I don't…" Neil shook his head. "I don't understand."

Todd nodded dejectedly.

He followed the pair out into the snow, and through the cluster of poets more than ecstatic to see Neil, and he stood there, away from them all, where he could watch the car all the way down the street.

"She kissed me!"

"Good on you, Knoxious."

Todd was awake when Charlie came in the next morning. They looked at each other in silence for too long, until Todd whispered hoarsely, "I know."

"Neil's-"

" *I know."*

It's a slow walk to the dock by himself.

I Discover Myself On the Verge Of A Usual Mistake

Chapter Notes

> HIIII I've decided I'm updating Mondays and Thursdays and I'm telling you all so I can be held accountable and will stop procrastinating writing. Shout out to my roommates who are probably so sick of the word "meatloop." Love you all.
>
> Kisses! Enjoy!

“You look tired.”

Neil meant well, looking over at Todd at breakfast. He still had that sleepy fog about him, that he didn’t lose until around third period. But he always noticed Todd.

Todd smiled somewhat cynically in response, digging around in his oatmeal. He’d discovered about four loops ago that if he put the sausage *in* the oatmeal, sometimes with syrup, sometimes without, it changed the flavor just enough that he didn’t immediately lose his appetite. A few loops before that he just hadn’t eaten at all, and then he’d gotten *really* sick and could hardly think straight.

The initial schedule he’d written out had washed off. It had proved somewhat unhelpful after a while, because things started changing when Todd messed with the events and it never fully ran that way again.

The lists had changed from things to try, to things that *had been* tried. It was a log, notes of his experiments because once he got above fifteen loops, they had started to blur together.

“-up in the tree. And I swear to God, this girl is like fourteen, but I was only eight so you know how it is. And she says ‘You ought to get down,’ and I want to talk to her, so I do, but as I’m climbing down-”

“The branch breaks,” Todd murmured in sync with Charlie, in nearly identical intonation. He was getting really, really tired of this story. *“And I fall nine feet to the ground.”*

Todd leaned his head toward Knox, who immediately jumped in with “No way it was that high. You’re full of shit.”

“It was!” Charlie cried indignantly. “That’s what my nanny told the doctor.” He waved it off. “But that’s not even the best part- *that* fall doesn’t break my arm. I’m totally fine. I mean, I scraped up my knees real bad, but I walked it off, and I go on. So this girl, she’s just freaking out, thinking I almost fell-”

Todd tipped his head back at the exact moment Mr. McCallister called, “Dalton! Quit yapping and eat your breakfast!”

Charlie flashed a shit-eating grin and shoved a spoonful of oatmeal in his mouth. “I’ll tell you later, I promise, it’s a good one.”

Pitts was about to ask for the milk pitcher. Todd passed it to him before he even got the words out.

When the bell rung and the boys started clearing out of the dining hall, Todd leaned in toward Neil.

“I *am* tired.”

“It just so happens… that I, I could care less about you!”

The snow was everywhere, falling on Chris like it could tell how beautiful it was, and wanted to be near her, with her.

Knox’s panic started to set in, that maybe she meant it, that really he’d made a fool of himself for nothing. That he couldn’t have the one thing he wanted at this moment. But in the next second, something else overtook the thought. “Then you wouldn’t be here, warning me about Chet.”

Maybe that *something* was delusion.

They argued of course, which was no huge setback for him, because he knew if she *really* wanted him to leave her alone, she would’ve left. Or not shown up at all. Or stopped smiling at him like she liked when he chased her.

“If you don’t like me after tonight, I’ll stay away forever.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I promise. Dead Poets honor.”

He had another thought, attached to that, to push his point across. He couldn't seem to recall it, though, because he was distracted by the bike rack behind her. By his bike.

"What are you looking at?" Chris asked.

"My bike lock is missing."

"This is stupid," Todd muttered.

It had been too easy to guess the code- Knox's birthday was October 17th, and surprise, surprise, the code was 101742. He'd brought it in his pocket with them.

He had it looped through the door after Knox and Chris arrived, but long before Mr. Perry came, so he wouldn't be able to get in and ruin Neil's mood before the performance ended. And then they would have to come around and figure out how to get it off, which would get Todd more time with Neil before he met up with his father.

It certainly wasn't overly sophisticated, but.. desperate times.

He'd actually already tried this. The problem was that he hadn't figured in how he was going to get *back in* the theater, but this time he propped open a backstage door with a rock- one that could only be opened from the inside- so Todd could get in and Tom could not.

He slipped around the corner and into the theater, kicking away the stone. It was dark, in the back, with the curtains and backdrops, and it was so easy for him to just vanish until the play was over. He'd done it at least three times now.

The poets cheered when Neil and Todd managed to trip through the audience almost twenty minutes after the show ended. Everyone started talking all at once, laughing and yelling to be heard over everyone else, until they were properly causing a scene. Neil looked iridescent, throwing himself amongst them to hug Meeks, and laugh at Pitts' commentary, and agree with Charlie that Hermia was hot.

"They're calling the fire department to come and break the door down," Cameron told Todd once he'd managed to untangle himself.

“I’m not worried.”

Todd was enjoying himself watching Neil. He’d never gotten a chance to talk to all the poets after the play before, and it was exactly as it should’ve been, the whole lot of them yawping and celebrating.

“What do you think, Captain?” Neil asked finally.

“You were wonderful!” He said enamorately. “You have the gift. You even left me speechless.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes.”

Neil grinned like he might burst.

But in seconds, the doors were wrenched open by a pair of firefighters with hedge clippers and barely a step behind them was Mr. Perry.

Todd watched the moment Neil switched.

“Neil. It’s time to go home.”

Todd pulled his pen from his pocket, rolled up his sleeve, and wrote on his forearm.

Bike Lock. Fail.

“Where are you going?” Cameron hissed.

“Bathroom,” Todd lied quickly, stepping over his knees to get to the aisle. Meeks and Pitts both shot him confused looks, but he swatted them off.

This loop felt like a cry for help. You fail so many times and you get in your head about it, and this was clearly what had happened. Because Todd had borrowed a lighter off Stick and he was going to burn Henley Hall down.

Let the record show- he had tried just pulling the fire alarm. It hadn’t delayed anything. So he needed to start a real fire.

He’d also reasoned that maybe, if there was a real fire, and things were scary for a second, then Tom would be afraid. And that when he

finally made it to Neil, he would realize how much he cared about him and wouldn't drive him to…

"What are you doing?!"

Todd froze, but it was too late. Cameron had seen him, and Keating was with him, and nothing would catch fire.

He ran back to the dock before Mr. Perry even got to the theater.

Todd felt like he had less and less time every loop. Which was ridiculous, and he knew it. It just felt like as soon as he'd tried something, he knew it had failed, and there was no reason to wait around for Charlie to come get him and tell him Neil was dead. It wasn't worth it.

The notes on his arm had moved to his legs; he'd been through enough loops to fill the skin there, and quite realistically, he was starting to run out of ideas. It seemed like nothing he could say to Neil would be worth enough to overpower whatever his father managed to pin him with.

The problem, about not having enough time, was that he always had plenty of time *after* the fact- after Neil was dead and nothing could be done. He never stayed long when it got to that point, because who would want to be in a world without Neil? Especially when he had the option to go back.

Todd had established that the physical time of day had nothing to do with the loop restarting. He would always wake up on December 15th at 6 am, but he could go from there as long as he wanted- it seemed- as long as he didn't cross the dock. Similarly, he could cross the dock early and cut the whole loop short.

He'd figured this out when one loop had gone horrifically wrong and Mr. Perry had ruined the play to get in a fight with Keating, and he had desperately sprinted to the dock to end it before someone got really hurt. Neil had been so miserable that loop, trying to break them up, to get them to stop yelling at each other, and he hadn't even been able to finish his show… Todd wanted to put an end to it as soon as he could.

He'd also hung around for a loop- when the thought of oatmeal for

breakfast was driving him insane- and stayed a few hours later on the 16th to have pancakes and bacon and just *see* what it was like. It had been horrible- Neil's empty spot at the table, Charlie's silence. It wasn't even worth the pancakes; he'd left early to go to the dock.

So now, the thought was occurring to him, what if he had stayed longer? Obviously, nothing on the 16th could bring Neil back, but maybe there was something there, some event that could be prevented, some truth revealed.

That was it! He'd stick around to see how things played out. Even if just for a few days. Which meant it was no use tampering with this loop- although he had no idea what he would've done anyway.

For now, he could just enjoy watching Neil act. It had been a while since he'd just watched the play anyway.

The world without Neil was just as terrible as he thought it would be the first time around. Charlie getting expelled is just another loss, another gaping hole in the group. Cameron finking on them like some pubescent, schoolboy Judas and making Todd wish he burned his hand more often.

The funeral was forced and uncomfortable, because everyone knew what happened, even the lowerclassmen that hadn't seen enough of life to comprehend death, but no one would talk about it, mention it at all. They acted like Neil had just… gone through a process. Like he'd moved to the West Coast or something. No one mentioned that he was *dead.* That something irreversible had happened to him. That there was no fixing it or recovering from it. He was dead, permanently.

Todd, of course, knew otherwise. A two-minute walk and Neil would be back in the hall without realizing he'd be gone. But because he knew, he felt so hyper-aware that no one else did. That this had happened and no one seemed to grasp the gravity of it.

When Keating goes, there's no point to it anymore. It was like every part of Neil was gone, like he had been completely forgotten. The Welton boy that had An Accident.

There was nothing for Todd to find here. Just a reminder that he absolutely couldn't let this be the reality. He had to figure this out.

The walk to the dock was so familiar, he could do it in his sleep.

"Do you have some Whitman I could borrow?"

Keating looked surprised, but pleasantly so, as he went to retrieve the green book. Todd had taken to calling it The Bible, because it seemed as though it didn't have a real title, and the idea amused him. He thought about telling Keating, but decided against it because there would be too much to explain.

"You've taken an interest in your madman?"

Todd sighed exhaustedly. "I'm hoping for answers."

"Hmm."

Todd was really at a loss. He had no idea where to go from here. It felt like anything he could change he *had,* and none of it had been enough. Hopefully, Whitman had something to offer him, some profound direction to cure the situation.

He returned to his room and threw himself on the bed, cracking open The Bible. He would read until Neil came back to grab his things in just less than an hour. That was his favorite thing in the loop- that single moment, hardly a few minutes, in which he and Neil had the room to themselves and it was as if they were the only people to exist- and he refused to miss it.

Most of the book was nonsense. Todd didn't actually know that much about poetry, just what Keating had taught them, so he couldn't do especially well on his own.

"Hey, you."

Todd rolled over, tucking the book closed, but leaving his thumb to keep the page. "Hi."

"I was looking everywhere for you! I wanted to see you before I left."

The thought that Neil cared he existed made him unnecessarily content, but he had a more pressing question. "Do you always look for me?"

It was a silly thing to say aloud, because Neil wouldn't know the answer. Despite this, he slipped into the secret smile. "Of course I do."

Todd believed him. In this loop and every one before it. Although usually, they were already together, so there was no need.

Neil changed quickly, throwing the assorted pieces of his uniform onto the desk chair. “I’ll fold that when I get back, I underestimated how much time I needed.”

“Because you were looking for me…”

“It’s important to me,” He shrugged as if it was that simple. As if Todd was important, just as a concept. “Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need it.”

Todd watched him slip out into the hall, out of their shared space for the last time (today at least). He reopened The Bible and tried to read, but he couldn’t keep himself from looking back up at the closed door.

I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake.

The line bolded from the page to stick with him, with this static thought of Neil that hadn’t managed to leave his mind since the loop had started.

“What do you mean, Walt?” He muttered desperately. It had clung to something in him, which meant it was important somehow, and he just needed to figure out why. What had he been thinking about, what train of thought did this connect to?

It was Neil’s last time in the dorm.

Todd slammed the book closed. *That* was his usual mistake. Because no matter how things went down at the theater, he always let Neil go home. Anytime Tom showed up, Todd let Neil go with him. Which meant the event he needed to change to keep Neil alive happened *after* he left the theater.

Suddenly he had a plan. Neil had to come back to Welton.

What's Mine Is a Landmine

Chapter Notes

HIIII DEARS

TW PLEASE READ
This is it- this is the trigger warning chapter that was foretold of in the prophecy (earlier author's notes). The particularly graphic part begins with "And there was Neil..." and ends with "...like a well-loved toy." Please be safe y'all- it's a little much, especially for my writing.

This was one of the first scenes that actually came to me when I started writing the fic, and every other scene is sort of centered around the exigence of this one. It is very heavily inspired by The Alcott by The National ft. Taylor Swift, which is why a lyric from the song is the chapter title instead of a Whitman quote.

Kisses to you all xx

The idea was half-baked at best.

To be fair, Todd had only had about an hour and a half to come up with it, so it wasn't all that bad.

He had a steak knife in the pocket of his suit jacket, which was insane for a night at the theater, except this was his forty-something night at the theater and, well, desperate times…

When Neil got up for his last monologue, Todd snuck out to the bathroom. At least that's what he whispered to Cameron as he tripped through the dark out the theater. He passed Mr. Perry in the back with a polite nod.

The snow had picked up. No more than it usually did, but it was strikingly pretty tonight. Maybe because this was the first loop in a long time that Todd had hope.

He found Tom's car easily because he'd watched it pull away from the theater more times than he could count. This wasn't a felony- at least, he didn't think so, and it didn't really matter if it was because he was going to do it anyway.

Todd pulled the steak knife from his pocket and with as much effort as

he could muster, stabbed it directly into the driver-side tire. The rubber resisted, but eventually gave way beneath the blade, and the air began to seep out.

Pedestrian? Maybe. But the delay would get him time to make sure he could get Neil to come back.

He was back in his seat, knife in his pocket, before Neil came out for bows.

The next bit went on as it usually did- the poets waiting in the snow for a downtrodden Neil, and Mr. Perry's angry shove out of the theater. But then Neil was in the car and Charlie was protesting in outrage, and it looked like they'd lost until…

"What the hell?"

So much for the dramatic exit. The bland goodbye.

"Come on, let him come back with us!" Charlie cried- once he'd realized what was going on- and Todd made a note to give him a kidney if he ever needed one.

"Yeah!" Todd agreed, which spurred on Pitts and Meeks, and even Cameron. "Come on, let's go home. Let's go, Neil!"

"I can't," He argued weakly, looking perfectly miserable. "Guys, come on. I can't."

"It's late! Let's all just go back!"

Neil stared off at the same spot in the snow.

Tom was embarrassed. Todd kind of liked watching him get red in the face, liked watching him suffer. Just a little. He deserved it just a little. Like Cameron and the burn.

"Go on then," He snapped finally, waving angrily toward the group.

Neil jolted up in shock. "What?"

"There's a tow truck coming, no reason for you to wait here. Just go with them."

Neil didn't move. This had to be a trap. It was too simple, too close to what Neil wanted to be real. "But-"

“It’s your last night in that school; I suggest you don’t waste it.”

Instantly, Neil crossed over to Todd, bridging the tragic gap between Poets and Perrys. “Come on, let’s go before he changes his mind.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay, let’s go,” Charlie nodded quickly.

The poets moved as a unit, pushing Neil in toward Keating’s car like they could tell something terrible would happen if they didn’t. They crammed in; there weren't enough seats for all of them, but with Meeks in Pitts lap and Charlie half-wedged in the leg space, they made it work. Knox came running over at the last minute, and threw himself in the passenger seat, immediately turning around to lean over the middle console.

“She kissed me!”

This time, he got the reaction he had been hoping for the first time.

“Good on you, Knoxious!” Charlie yawped.

Things were different this time.

Todd, somewhat naively, had expected everything to go completely back to normal as soon as Neil was back. He’d done it this time; he’d gotten him out of whatever situation drove him to madness tonight, and everything would be fine. It wasn’t, of course.

Neil was upset. Not even Charlie’s endless chatter could make him smile all the way to his eyes, and he stood within arm's length of Keating at any moment, like his father was going to storm back in at any moment and try to take him away, and Keating was the only one that could save him.

Keating would’ve figured it out before now, Todd thought cynically. He was smarter than Todd. He would’ve worked it out and it wouldn’t have taken him nearly this long.

Todd was immensely relieved. Finally. Sure, Neil was on edge and there were little things to work out. But he wasn’t going to die alone in that house again, which is really what Todd had been hoping for.

Neil went with them to the kitchen. He hovered near Todd as Charlie and Knox did their regular routine of finding meatballs in the fridge,

and Meeks dug out forks. Five this time.

They stood in different places around the counter, making room for Neil between Todd and Charlie, and Knox and Meeks actually spoke to each other, breaking the usual ritual of their silent chewing.

When Charlie choked- because he still did, of course- Neil punched him in the back and half-smiled without any real emotion.

Todd could *feel* Neil's anxiety. It was seeping through the room and taking up every bit of spare space, pressing on Todd's chest like it was his own.

"It's okay," He whispered desperately, and Neil startled like he had forgotten he wasn't alone.

"I know," He mumbled.

Meeks' hands didn't shake, so no toothpaste. The water was still too cold, but after Todd had brushed his teeth, Neil was there at the sink, and it was the most mundanely beautiful thing Todd had ever witnessed.

He really had no intention of going to sleep. He assumed Neil would be too stressed to really sleep, and the toxic fumes of his thoughts would keep Todd up too. But wrapped in his warm bed with the satisfaction that he'd brought Neil back was so euphoric that his poor overworked, deprived brain tumbled wildly into sleep anyway. He battled into consciousness every half hour, pressing up groggily on his pillows to squint into the dark and be sure Neil was still in his own bed, before falling back down and losing any grip on sentience.

It was hardly sleep at all, really, more just fitful lapses in wakefulness strung together like some pedestrian medieval torture.

Ultimately, around three or four in the morning, when Charlie normally came around, he woke out of habit. Blinking feebly against the streaming blindness of Neil's desk lamp, which had been turned on sometime in the last while.

Neil wasn't in bed.

Todd scrambled to his feet. He tore back his blankets frantically, but found nothing but his gray sheets. "Neil," He gasped.

On the desk, a notepad had been left- yellow paper with deep maroon

lines, and a black ink massacre on the top sheet.

Dear Todd,

Todd's pulse pounded in his ears.

You'll be the first to notice I'm gone, so I'm begging you not to come looking for me. I guarantee it's too late, and I'd rather you didn't have to see this. Just wait here until someone comes to get you. And don't feel bad, really, because there was nothing you could've said to stop me. It's not your fault. I'm not angry with you, I never could be. It's. Not. Your. Fault.

You were right- I should have listened to my father and stayed away from acting. After tonight, I know I could never be happy being just a doctor. I have to act. Up on that stage was the first time I've ever felt like myself. Like I wasn't pretending to be someone I'm not, ironically enough. I'm trapped and I've got to get out.

Please don't hate me too long. It's really not all that bad for me. Your life starts to lose its value when it's not yours. I've got to fly.

Always yours, Neil

Todd was getting sick again. He tasted meatball almost preemptively, reading over the note again and again. God, no. He wouldn't. He… He killed himself at home, he wouldn't do it at Welton, this wasn't how the loop was meant to go.

Todd had saved him. Todd had saved him.

I've got to fly.

This desk set… wants to fly.

Todd ran.

He pounded down stairs and slid through halls as fast as he could, chest heaving until his whole torso ached. Shoved through the oak doors and into the cold air, onto the bridge where they'd been that night on his birthday.

The deserted bridge.

"Neil!" He screamed, voice scraping from his mouth with labored breath. No, no, no, he wasn't too late this time, he wasn't, he wasn't…

He ran out onto the bridge, under the lights. Neil's shoes had been abandoned to the side, kicked off, and set deliberately in shadow. And right above them, resting on the parapet, was Puck's berry crown.

"Neil!" He leaned over the edge, the cold stone eating into his hands and his stomach. He peered into the dark, the gaping chasm beneath him, although he knew it couldn't be more than two stories above the ground. "No! Neil, NO!"

And there was Neil, body splayed against cobblestone. Broken the way toothpicks do- in splintered, messy fractures.

Todd sobbed, falling down the spiraled stone stairs and crawling his way toward him. His hands caught the rocks, slick with mud and blood, and his stomach lurched, in a way so familiar it was almost pleasant to feel the vomit froth from his lips. It wasn't clean, like in the snow, no. It was on his clothes and his hands, another layer in the mess on the sidewalk.

"Neil!" Todd retched, pulling his head into his lap. The back of his skull had crushed in against the rocks, and the blood was gushing irreparably from the wound, onto Todd's clothes, his skin. He pressed his hands to it desperately, like maybe he could hold the grey matter in, could preserve that much of Neil.

Ribs stuck out from Neil's sweater like shattered glass, not stiff enough to puncture the fabric but defined enough to disturb the softness of his torso. Todd clawed at his body like a misguided dog, trying to salvage the pieces, put him back together like a well-loved toy.

Todd wailed into Neil's filthy hair. "Please, God, not again, not again! Please!"

But Neil didn't wake up, he wouldn't. Because Todd had done the most he could, and it still wasn't enough. It still didn't save them, didn't save *Neil,* because Todd was nothing. Todd couldn't save soft, perfect Neil from the death that wanted to love him more than his father, because he was just a boy, and he didn't know how to talk to adults or make decisions or do anything that mattered at all.

There would be more loops, there would be this day in December for the rest of Todd's life, and he would never find the way to make it work. The problem wasn't how soon he got to the theater, or how long after Neil managed to stay. The problem was *him, Todd,* who had never done anything well enough.

Todd's inadequacy had gone from disappointing his parents to killing Neil.

Todd needed to escape, needed to leave this place with Neil's broken body draped over him like a Greek statue of Christ, and he knew he just had to reach the dock, tumble out over the water, and he would be back in his bed, with Neil standing over him knotting his tie.

But he didn't run yet, oh no. This was his fault. This shattered body was *his fault,* and he was going to make himself suffer, remember this moment like it could teach him something. Like if he hated himself enough for what happened, it would convince his brain to be enough, to make him good enough to fix it.

And he *did.* Oh, he hated himself. He wanted to be anyone, anyone at all that wasn't so perfectly unfixable, so perpetually insufficient. Someone that could be enough for Neil, for himself, even.

Someone who didn't vomit meatball all over themselves at the sight of their dead best friend.

He didn't want to wait in this loop. Didn't want the poets to come down from their safe, warm beds and get ravaged with this macabre image. It had been different before, when they didn't know what it looked like, when Neil was still in one piece and there could've been a funeral. Nothing was saveable now; to bury Neil fully, they'd have to bury Todd with him.

And even worse, was the creeping feeling that this wasn't just another indefinite numbered loop, that this was the real one and he would have to live with this forever and ever.

Actually, it didn't matter. He would have to live with this forever and ever, even if he did get to another loop where he did it right. This Neil would be on him until the end of time, the martyr of Todd's sins, his imperfection. Collateral damage.

No, no, no. It couldn't be. There had to be another try. One more shot, and even if it was tragic, it would be better than this.

Todd stumbled blindly to his feet, swaying with Neil's weight. If Todd's world reset when he crossed the dock, Neil would reset too. That was how it happened every time before now. Todd didn't want to risk it. He couldn't leave Neil here, not sure if he would be fine when Todd started the morning over.

Todd roped his arms under Neil's, crossed over his torn chest, and started to drag him out toward the lake. His bare feet scraped against the stone, tearing up the skin, but it was nothing compared to the rest of him, so Todd continued.

He sobbed, still, because it was that or vomiting, and the meatball was completely out of his system. It felt like miles to walk, tripping backward, to make it to the dock.

Worse was when they met the grass, and the built-up top layer of unblemished snow, where Todd's heavy footfalls splashed the surface every which way, and Neil left behind a sickly trail the color of bodily fluids. It ruined the landscape, marred the entire ambience of the picturesque grounds with the reality.

As the land sloped, Todd fell, Neil landing lifelessly on top of him again, and Todd had to throw his head back and just howl with the agony of it, of his dead weight pressing on his chest. He forced himself back up, this time only able to grab Neil by the arms and leave more of him dragging, but he was so *heavy,* everything was so heavy and Todd couldn't carry it all with the snot and vomit in his mouth.

At the base of the dock, Todd cried out in miserable relief, finding the strength to haul him up around the waist, and pitched to the edge, to the gleaming, smooth surface of the ice layer on the water.

"I'm so sorry," he gasped, burying his face in the bloody spot against Neil's neck and shoulder, and sent them plummeting into the freezing water.

Be Not Afraid Of My Body

Todd woke up in bed, immediately rolled onto his side, pulled his knees to his chest, and refused to lift his head above the blanket.

He could hear Neil in the room, rustling as he got dressed, but Todd didn't want to see him, didn't want to think of him at all. He was still sick to his stomach, still reeling from it all.

How do you live normally when you know the exact weight of your best friend's body?

"Todd, you gotta get up." Neil laughed, poking at him through the blanket.

He didn't even want to look at him. He couldn't escape the garish thought of his ravished body, and that translated to instant revulsion of him in real life. He hated it, hated that beautiful, perfect Neil could be ruined this way, and desperately wished to undo it, to completely lose this impression of him, but no thought was quite pure enough to wash it over.

"Hager's gonna be in here any minute and he'll get after you."

"I don't feel good," Todd mumbled miserably. Which was true.

"Then you have to go to the infirmary to get a note."

Todd tried to curl himself tighter, like he might disappear from existence altogether and get away from Neil, which was a horrible thought because he never wanted to be away from Neil. It didn't work of course, and Neil continued to poke at him. Todd could see the smirk lighting his face without so much as opening his eyes.

"C'mon, Todd, the play's tonight. You can't be too sick. You were fine last night."

"You were dead last night," Todd murmured cynically.

"Let's go," Neil tried to pull the blankets off him, and Todd, feeling exposed and unprotected, cried out furiously.

"Just go to class! I can take care of myself!"

Neil's face fell. Todd, now out in the cold air, got that as his first sight

of Neil in this loop. Neil was quite obviously taken aback by Todd's outburst, the obvious anger in his voice. He started to say something, but Todd cut him off.

"'What's gotten into me?' yeah, I know." He disappeared back under the blankets.

For a moment, Neil remained sitting there on the edge of his bed, clearly confused and undoubtedly hurt, but Todd pretended he didn't care. He was angry. Not at Neil, per se, but as his choice, at the idea that he cared about himself so little, he didn't mind flinging himself at death whenever the opportunity presented itself. He was angry at Mr. Perry for driving him to think there was no escape, angry at Welton for pushing him so hard every moment, pushing all of them to insanity, and he was angry that it was him stuck in this stupid fucking time-loop. What did he do to deserve this? Why couldn't it be someone else, and he could just live the day over and over in perfect, unaware bliss until they came up with the answer?

Eventually, Neil stood up, and Todd could feel the warmth of where his thigh had pressed against his lower back vaporize instantly. Angry as he was, there was some comfort in Neil's nearness- there always had been.

"Please don't be sick too long," Neil said smally. "I really want you to see me tonight."

Then Todd was just angry at himself. He'd hurt Neil's feelings, on top of everything else the poor boy had going on at the moment. Todd was no better than the rest of them.

"Okay," Todd said, muffled through the sheets. He wasn't sure Neil could even hear it, or if he was even still in the room.

Please don't hate me too long.

That infernal note. They never had talked that closely to the actual act. That was the closest he'd ever gotten to really understanding his thought process.

Todd laid in bed for hours. A nurse came to bother him, to see if he was really just faking illness to get out of class, but he claimed to have vomited- which was somewhat true- but there was no way to really check. He must've looked really awful, because she believed him, getting him out of class for the day and telling him she would be back in a few hours to check his temperature and bring some food. Fine,

whatever. Todd didn't care. He could stop breathing on his own for all he cared.

Sometime around lunch, Neil came back. He was damn near silent, dumping his books on his desk to trade them out for the ones he needed for the afternoon block.

Todd wasn't asleep, but he must've assumed he was, what with the careful way he moved.

" *Todd,"* He whispered finally.

Todd felt immensely guilty for losing it at him earlier. The longer he'd laid there, the more it became apparent. It wasn't Neil's fault all this was happening. In fact, Neil had deliberately told him in the note *not* to come after him, and he'd done it anyway, so there was no legitimate reason to be mad at him.

"Yeah?" Todd answered hoarsely. He didn't come out from the safety of his sheets, still didn't look at Neil.

"How do you feel?"

Not well, Todd thought, but didn't say it. Neil knew that, he was just trying to mend the gap between them. Todd tried to help. "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"'S okay." Neil sounded small again. The way he did when he felt like his whole existence was proof he was doing something wrong. Todd really did feel bad.

"Keating said to get better soon, and, uh, he sent this, in case you got bored. Said you might think it was interesting."

Todd was washed with relief. He knew what he was holding- The Bible- and he was so grateful he would have its wisdom without having to go get it himself. He didn't want to pry himself from bed for the foreseeable future.

Neil sat on his bed again, careful to avoid the Todd-shaped lump beneath the blankets. He thumbed through the book- Todd heard the swishing of pages- and he said quietly, mostly to himself, "Oh, it's Whitman."

For a minute, it was silent, as Neil read, until finally he said, "Jesus, he doesn't make a lot of sense, does he?"

That's because it's my *bible.* Todd thought. It didn't have to make sense to anyone else.

"He's a hellraiser though. Listen to this," He cleared his throat dramatically and read aloud, " *Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass. Be not afraid of my body."* He chuckled. "Sheesh."

Todd's chest hurt. Yeah, he got it. Of all the passages in that book, that was the one Neil would read. In this loop specifically. *Thanks, Walt.*

The Bible had yet to lead him astray, which is why Todd felt the stability to uncover himself like some half-decomposed fossil. He squinted against the blinding midday light and flinched away from the cold resulting in the lack of his own breath, but he adjusted quickly.

"Hey, you," Neil mumbled, smiling fondly.

"Hi," Todd croaked.

Neil reached out gently, ruffling Todd's disheveled hair back into a more presentable style. It was so soft, so seemingly intimate, that Todd felt as if it wasn't even happening to him, he was just witnessing it.

He wasn't afraid anymore. This Neil was so alive and beautiful, it seemed to be not even the same body at all. His skin was clean and warm, fingertips dipping just below Todd's hair and brushing his ear delicately, and anything that transpired in the mud the night before felt trivial. Why be upset over a shadow, a ragdoll, when the real-life thing was there in front of you?

"Will you come tonight?" Neil breathed, in the tender space between them.

Todd hated to tell him, "I can't. If I'm too sick for classes, I'm too sick for fun."

He nodded. Understandingly, if not immensely disappointed.

"I'm sorry," Todd swallowed thickly. He was suddenly possessed by the need to do exactly as Whitman said, to touch Neil with the same softness he had for him. "For everything. I'm so sorry this is happening to you."

Todd's courage fluctuated wildly between loops and moments, but at

this one specifically- although he wasn't brave enough to get out of bed- he mustered up just enough strength to do it, to put his hand on Neil's knee, to trace the seam of his curled leg with his thumb.

Neil lit into the secret smile, covering Todd's hand with his own, and taking hold of his index finger, like he could make the gesture seem closer, could somehow make the moment more intimate between them.

"It's okay," He said. "It's not like you've never heard my lines. But next time."

I've seen you perform a hundred times, and loved it every time. I could watch it a hundred times more and never get tired of it.

"Next time? You're gonna keep acting?"

Neil started to say something, then paused, entire demeanor falling into something resigned and obedient. "No. Probably not. I don't think my father would ever forgive me." He laughed humorlessly, trying to lighten it. "Don't tell Keating. I told him I'd stay with it."

"You lied to Keating?"

He nodded shamefully.

"Why?"

Neil frowned. His grip on Todd's finger shifted uncomfortably, but he didn't remove it, instead tracing his knuckle with his thumb- almost at the same pace as Todd's thumb against the inside of his leg. "Well, it's, uh, not very c-carpe diem of me." His voice crack was heartbreaking. "I mean, I'm already disappointing my father, I don't… I don't want to disappoint Keating too."

"No, that's not…" Todd knew what he meant. It made sense, really. "No, remember what he told Charlie? There's a difference between sucking the marrow out of life and choking on the bone. If you're not safe, it's not worth it."

"He's not, like, gonna beat me or something."

"That's… not what I mean." Todd shook his head. He wasn't sure what he *did* mean.

"I guess, I've always disappointed my father, so I don't mind that so

much. What else is new, right? Keating is different. Even if he's not angry at me, or he even understands, I still didn't do what he wanted me to. You know?"

Todd wished he could crawl inside Neil's brain and find all the parts that his father had ruined. He would spend hours if he could, meticulously removing the rot, those decayed pieces that conjured up thoughts like that. He wondered if it would help at all.

"I know," He agreed instead. "Disappointing my parents is, like, the one thing I'm good at."

"Your parents are stupid."

"So are yours."

They both laughed softly, bonded in this mutual hate for themselves. And still, over all of it, was the clear affection for each other, soothing any of the perpetual ache with the sheer presence of the other.

"Class is starting."

"Do you think they'd believe I'm sick too? I caught what you have."

Todd grinned. "Too sick for class, too sick to act."

"What's the point if you're not there?"

"Go to class, Puck."

Neil laughed, genuinely and unbridled for the first time in the whole conversation. "Okay, okay! I'll see you after, okay? Wish me luck."

"You don't need it."

Todd, of course, was well aware that this wouldn't be enough. That even if Neil could see that he wasn't alone in this, he couldn't find it in him to live through the night.

When the other poets returned late, he tried his hardest not to hope Neil would be with them. He could hear Charlie and Knox whispering in the hall, but Neil never came into their room. Todd felt the familiar pit in his stomach. He had failed. He always did.

He stumbled into the kitchen. Meeks, Charlie, and Knox all looked up

from their meatballs as if they'd been caught, then relaxed when they realized it was him.

"What happened?" Todd whispered, afraid of the answer.

They looked between each other in reserved panic, until Meeks said, "He yelled at his father, his father yelled back and dragged him to the car. He's taking him out of Welton and putting him in military school. He's not allowed to act anymore."

Yeah, that's what Todd guessed. Tears pricked at his eyes before he could stop them. How many times would he have to suffer through this? How long until the grief wasn't so insurmountable?

Todd was angry again, this time at himself. He had to stop believing that he, himself, was enough to get Neil through this, that there was any hope. It was ruining his life over and over to be constantly reminded he was worthless in the grand scheme of things. But there was something else, something new. Some endless guilt and *longing,* some perpetual desire consistently unfulfilled that made him feel hungry in a way cold meatballs could never satiate, nothing material could. It was inexplicable and unfamiliar, and he hated it, he hated it, he hated him…

Charlie shoved the meatball in his mouth and started to choke. Knox pounded on his back and Todd, overwhelmed with emotion yelled, "CHEW YOUR GODDAMN MEATBALL, CHARLIE!"

All three boys stared at him in shock- that was the second time in one day shy, reserved Todd had lost his shit- and Charlie started to chew whatever was left in his mouth sheepishly.

"What's wrong?" Meeks asked carefully.

Todd shook his head, fighting the water that began to stream down his cheeks. How he ached for *something,* so much it violently hurt him.

"Something horrible happens tonight," Todd whispered, the oracle of one single tragic day. "Something absolutely terrible, and *I can't stop it."*

"What happens?" Knox pressed, sounding afraid.

"You don't want to know."

Todd made it to the dock before they ever did.

We Two Boys Together Clinging

Todd's oatmeal tasted fantastic.

It was the first time in many Tuesdays that it had, but that gaping hole inside of him had opened up suddenly and the oatmeal was familiar and filling. He kept his head down at the table, more worried about shoveling the hot, bland mush into his mouth as fast as he could than about looking normal.

"Jesus, Todd," Neil laughed softly. "No one's gonna take it from you."

Todd paused, mid-spoonful, to smile awkwardly, before jamming it in his mouth anyway.

"So obviously, I'm up in the tree. And I swear to God, this girl is like fourteen, but I was only eight so you know how it is. And she says 'You ought to get down,' and I want to talk to her, so I do, but as I'm climbing down, the branch breaks, and I fall nine feet to the ground."

Knox jumped up. "No way it was that high. You're full of shit."

"It was!" Charlie argued indignantly. "But that's not even the best part-"

"That wasn't what broke your arm," Todd said, and for some reason, the way Charlie's face spiked in outrage at the story having been spoiled made him want to laugh.

"How do you know that? Have I told you this before?"

"Charlie, you talk so much, we don't know what you've told us." Pitts rolled his eyes, and nudged Meeks, who agreed with a grin, "Yeah, we stopped listening to your stories freshman year."

"Then how would Todd know it?" He cried.

"Dalton! Quit yapping and eat your breakfast!"

Charlie made a face but leaned in conspiratorially toward Todd. "You'll tell me your secret later, won't you?"

Neil chuckled, biting around the sausage link on his fork, but Todd only half-acknowledged it.

He was getting an idea.

"Charlie!"

Charlie was surprised, turning around to face him, then even more surprised when Todd grabbed the knot of his tie and yanked him back behind the pillar. "Jesus Christ!"

"Hush," Todd muttered exasperatedly, checking that the hall had somewhat cleared. "We need to talk."

"Fuck's going on?"

Again with Todd not really thinking things through all the way before he started to do them. But the truth of the matter was, that he had exhausted every idea he could come up with and was no closer to cracking the loop than he had been the first time. He needed someone else's brain, someone else's opinion, and the only person who would even begin to believe what he had to say without looking at him like he needed to be institutionalized was, well…

"I have to tell you something. And you have to believe me. And I know it sounds crazy, but I'm serious."

Charlie looked more confused than anything, which was probably better than being angry or scared. The problem was that Todd didn't know if his explanation could make him any less confused. Here went nothing.

"You know how today's Tuesday, right?" Todd started.

"Yeah, of course, what are you-"

"And what was yesterday?"

"... Monday? Todd, what the actual-"

"For you! For you it was Monday, or you think it was Monday, I don't really know. But yesterday, for me, was *Tuesday*. And the day before that was Tuesday too. "

Charlie nodded slowly. "Okay, I see."

"Really?"

Charlie kept nodding, taking a step backward. “Oh yeah, why don’t you sit down- NEIL! NEIL! SOMETHING’S WRONG WITH-”

Todd grabbed him, clamping a hand over his mouth and pulling him back in behind the pillar. “Shut up! God, just listen to me! I know I sound insane, but, just, just shut up and listen. Today is Tuesday, and yesterday was Tuesday, and it was Tuesday before that, for, like forty-five days. I don’t know, I lost count. You don’t remember, because when Tuesday starts over, you start over too. I don’t know how it happens, or why it’s happening, but it is. And I need help. If I take my hand off your face, are you going to scream?”

Charlie, wide-eyed, shook his head.

Todd stared at him, trying to find some telling sign that he was lying, and when he found nothing, he slowly let go.

“NEIL! TODD’S LOST HIS GODDAMN-”

“Jesus, Charlie!” And there they were again, with Todd shoving Charlie against the wall, hand pressed firmly against his mouth. Although, Charlie was fighting it more this time, and Todd was genuinely a little afraid he would bite him.

“I’m serious! I’m not crazy, trust me, I thought so too, but I swear, I’m telling the truth. That’s how I knew how your story ended this morning, that’s how I know everything that’s going to happen today.”

Charlie continued to fight against him- albeit vainly- and it was the first time Todd realized how much bigger than him he was. Charlie was so loud and Todd was so quiet, it almost felt the opposite.

“Watch! Watch, I can prove it!” Todd glanced over his shoulder. “Connor and Stick are about to come down this hall. Connor says something about how tired he is, and Stick says there’s no girls here. Listen-”

Almost immediately, a pair of footfalls echoed through the hall.

“I don’t know, man! I just get back to my room and I do anything but sleep! I’m exhausted!”

Stick scoffed. “What is there to stay up for? It’s not like we’ve got girls.”

Charlie relaxed against the wall. Todd lifted his hand slowly, ready to

push it back the second he made a noise, but Charlie just said, “How did you do that?”

“Here comes Spaz, and he’s gonna drop his protractor.”

Sure enough, came the familiar clatter of acrylic on tile. Spaz continued past so they could see him walk away from where they were hidden.

“Okay, Stick making a joke about girls and Spaz dropping something proves nothing. They do that all day. Let me guess, then Hopkins hits somebody upside the head and says something dense?”

“No.” Todd rolled his eyes. He was a little bothered that Charlie hadn’t appreciated the miracle of his trick. He was significantly more bothered by the fact that Charlie was right. “But, in lab, Cameron bursts a test tube.”

“Is that what’s up his ass? Because that’s the only way I could see him doing something like that.”

“This is stupid,” Todd said, mostly to himself, scrubbing his face exasperatedly. “Let’s go to class. You’ll see it. He puts the copper sulfate in and it gets too hot, explodes, and burns his hand here and here.” He pointed to his own hand. “I can even point out the exact moment.”

“Yeah? Okay, sure. Why not?”

“But listen. You can’t say anything to Neil. DON’T ask why, I know you’re about to. Just trust me. See if Cameron does it, and then we can talk.”

“You’re certifiable,” Charlie said pointedly but walked with him to the laboratory.

Todd could handle certifiable if at least he wasn’t alone.

Laboratory went as it always did. Todd had done these titrations so many times, he hardly had to think. Charlie continuously looked over and shot demanding looks to Todd who motioned that *it wasn’t time yet.*

Until it was. Cameron had the test tube in the clamp over the Bunsen burner and Todd nudged Charlie to get his attention. Todd flinched preemptively, until the glass got hot enough it simply shattered, and

copper went flying everywhere.

Cameron cried out, yanking his hand back from the fire, shaking off the hot salt, and Charlie peered around Todd, staring- nearly catatonic- at the angry welts on his skin. Exactly where Todd said they would be.

Todd leaned in and whispered, “Leason will say it’s the first time.”

Dr. Leason helped him clean and bandage the burns. “You’ve never done anything like this before.”

Charlie looked up at Todd with the biggest shit-eating grin he’d ever had. And that was really saying something.

“I’ve choked on a meatball like fifty times, that’s what you’re telling me.”

Todd stopped mid-explanation. That’s what he’d gotten out of the whole story, of course. “Yes, that’s… that’s true.”

“Why today? It’s like the most boring day ever. So what, Cameron explodes a test tube and I choke on a meatball?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. If you would stop interrupting…” But Todd didn’t really mind his interruptions, because he didn’t want to tell him about… *it.* It was a heavy thing to carry- he knew that well enough- and he didn’t want to curse Charlie with it too.

“Is it something bad?”

“Yes.”

Charlie stopped walking. He’d lead them down by the mathematics rooms, where all the younger boys were in class. They had a sort of free period after Keating’s class- that was the first opportunity they’d gotten to talk about all of this. “How bad?”

“You were never the same after it happened.”

He looked puzzled but not concerned. He stared at Todd expectantly.

Todd continued walking. Picking up the pace to distract himself from it. It had never been this way before- Charlie was always the one to tell him, not the other way around.

“Come on, how bad can it be? Tell me, Todd.” Charlie chased after him, trying to catch up.

He took the deepest breath he could, exhaling *“Neil dies,”* like it could soften the delivery.

“What? Bullshit! How would that even make sen-”

“He does the play, his dad catches him, takes him home, they get in a fight, and Neil shoots himself. It’s happened again and again. I’ve seen it.” It fell from his mouth quickly, awkwardly, pieces strung together like they were trying to be a whole picture.

Charlie looked like he wanted to argue some more, but he met Todd’s eyes and must’ve seen something haunted there. “God, you’re serious.”

Todd nodded.

“Okay, so… so, you’re stuck in this… this *meatloop*… until Neil doesn’t die?”

“I think so.” Todd made a face. “ *Meatloop?”*

“Yeah. Like Meatball Timeloop. Meatloop.”

“Great. I hate it.”

Charlie smirked, and Todd almost smiled. He was right; it felt better to do this with someone. To not be so terribly alone.

“What have you tried?”

“It would be easier for you to just tell me your ideas, and then I can just tell you if it works or not.”

That’s how it went on for the next half hour- Charlie suggesting something Todd had tried ages before, only for Todd to explain exactly why it didn’t work.

“So, we can’t stop Tom from getting in, and we can’t bring Neil back here, and… what if we just… didn’t let Neil go to the play at all? Then his father won’t have any reason to get angry at him.”

Todd gaped. Of course. It felt like the most obvious solution he’d ever encountered. None of the nonsense at the theater- or after it- ever happened if Neil *never went to the theater.* The thought had never

occurred to him, he was beginning to see, because it required him to take something away from Neil, something he desperately wanted, and consequently, Todd's brain had completely ruled it out as viable.

"That's it."

"You're right, so we've got to figure out-" Charlie stopped rambling. "What? You never tried that? I thought for sure-"

"No, I never…"

"This is why you come to me," He smirked. "So how do we keep Neil from the play?"

Todd sighed. "I don't know."

"Yeah, but… well, look. Every event in the meatloop builds on the last, right? So there's an event that happens that we just have to undo, that moves the change up a little bit. Like, instead of waiting until we're at the theater, we have to mess up what's going on right now, which will change the rest of the night."

"Do you… make sense to yourself when you talk?"

He rolled his eyes goodnaturedly.

The pair had traversed a good part of the school- it was snowing outside or they would've moved that way- and found themselves in McCallister's empty study hall. Todd sat on one of the tables and put his head in his hands. "I've just… I've got to think."

Charlie sat next to him. He propped his chin in his hand, elbow on his knee, talking through his tight jaw. "What is Neil doing right now?"

"I think he's in Spencer's room…" Todd mumbled absently.

"Why don't we just ask Keating?"

"How do you suggest we do that? *Hey, we need you to keep Neil from the one thing he wants, that you also want for him. I know this because I'm stuck in a meatloop.* That would go down *so* well. I'm lucky enough I got you to take me seriously."

Charlie shrugged. He was staring off, watching the thick flakes of snow tumble to the ground outside the window. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

Todd needed The Bible. This was a problem for Uncle Walt. And soon, too. Hager would pull Neil from class so he could get dressed and head out within the hour.

“I’m going to talk to Keating.”

“You just said we couldn’t talk to Keating.”

“Not about this. I need to borrow something.”

Charlie climbed off the table and followed him back into the hall.

Keating was at his desk grading papers, instead of in his office downstairs, thankfully, and he looked up in surprise as the boys dashed into the empty classroom.

“Hi,” Todd panted. “Can I have the Whitman book?”

The surprise didn’t leave his face, but it morphed with some sophisticated confusion. “I gave it to Neil.”

Todd blinked. “What? Why would you do that?”

“He was upset, and you two were whispering between yourselves instead of noticing. Thought he might need a friend.”

Charlie motioned to Todd exasperatedly. “Hate to rush you, but we don’t have any time for light reading right now.”

“No, I… I need The Bible.” He waved him off. “We’ve got to go to Spencer’s and get it from him.”

Keating tipped his head. “You call it The Bible?”

Todd smiled uncomfortably. “That’s a story for another Tuesday.” He turned back toward the door and started down the aisle between desks.

“Hold on,” Charlie called. “He doesn’t usually give it to Neil?”

“No, he gives it to me.”

“So, why did he give it to Neil this time?”

“Because me and you were talking, did you not hear? I’ve never told you before, so that’s never happened.”

Charlie, hands on his hips, whipped toward Keating. “When did you give it to him?”

Keating was clearly taken aback, and beyond confused, which was exactly what Todd knew would happen, but he answered slowly, “Right after class… we were talking.”

Charlie turned back to Todd. “Does that always happen?”

“Not always, but usually. Otherwise, he talks to me after class. Come on, Charlie, we’ve got to go.” He ran out toward Spencer’s.

“Charlie, what’s going on?”

“As if I know.” He chased after Todd, then stopped short when he nearly slammed into him as he ducked back into the classroom.

“Did Neil tell you he was going to keep acting?”

Keating had gotten to his feet. “He did, but-”

The pieces were falling together for Todd now. He’d never realized that this conversation happened before, but it must’ve. Neil confirmed it last loop, even. His whole head felt like it might explode, connecting timelines and events to track the interrelatedness. God, it was getting complicated. “He lied.”

Keating answered levelly, “I know.”

Charlie’s sight flashed back and forth between the two of them. His eyebrows had gotten closer and lower with everything that was being said, lips parted stupidly, until he looked hopelessly lost.

“You know.” Todd echoed. “You know he lied, and you’re still going to let him go?”

“It’s not my choice to make. It’s between him and his father.”

“Yeah, but,” Todd shook his head frantically, to clear the buildup of thoughts. “But he’s gonna go tonight because he thinks he’ll disappoint you. And his father’s going to kill him. You have to talk to him. Knock some sense into him.”

“I thought you said he shot himself,” Charlie muttered.

“Does it matter who pulled the trigger, if we know who drove him to it?”

Charlie contemplated this, then nodded in agreement. “Right, okay. Come on, Captain, we’ve got to go get him.”

Keating, driven, if not by Todd’s less than compelling argument, then by his desperation, came with them.

Charlie, with the subtlety of an atom bomb, threw open the door to Spencer’s classroom. Every head turned to stare at them, at Charlie’s chagrined delight and Todd’s sheer mortification bred with Keating’s vexation.

“Mr. Dalton, what do you-” Dr. Spencer started, furiously.

“Hi. Hello. Official School Annual business,” He flashed a charming grin. “Can we just borrow Neil, for just a minute? Thanks.”

Neil, from his seat in the middle row, shook his head exasperatedly and pushed his hand under his glasses to scrub the spot between his eyebrows.

“Mr. Keating, are you supervising this?”

“As much as Dalton can be,” He smiled exhaustedly. “We’ll just need him for a minute.”

Dr. Spencer, while clearly overwhelmed by the interruption, was in a hurry to end it, and promptly ordered, “Mr. Perry, you’re excused.”

Neil got to his feet and hurried toward the doorway to shove the three of them into the hall as quickly as he could. “ *What* are you doing? Hager’s coming any-”

“It’s about that,” Charlie interrupted. “You can’t go tonight. Tell him, Todd.”

Todd stammered, suddenly anxious at having been put on the spot without anything substantial to say. “Neil, I…”

“We know you didn’t talk to your father,” Keating said. “These two want me to tell you to do what you need to do, and not let me sway your decision.”

“I… I don’t understand.”

Todd said miserably, “You know you can’t perform unless your father says you can.”

“So you *finked* to Keating?” Neil took a step back, staring at him in something akin to but too complicated to be betrayal. “You have no right to-”

“No, no, it’s not Todd’s fault,” Charlie lied instantly, stepping in between them. “It was me, I told him. I know your dad, and I know what he does to you, and I had to say something. You know I can’t keep my mouth shut.”

“What the hell, Charlie? Whose side are you on? What about *carpe diem,* and… and sticking it to him? Of all people, I’d think that you would want me to do this.”

“I do! I do, but… man, you’ve gotta trust me. You know I wouldn’t fink on you if I thought it would cause problems for you. Carpe Diem doesn’t mean Be Stupid.”

“Come on, Neil,” Keating took over. “This is your decision. You have to decide if you want to act right now enough that you talk to your father, or you need to suffer through it until you graduate and you can do what you want. But I promise, I won’t be disappointed either way. It’s not my place. I should hope I’ve taught you well enough to make the decision for yourself.”

Neil’s apparent anger at Charlie (and/or Todd?) shifted to disappointment. His shoulders fell dejectedly, and he seemed to be working through some internal argument. He glanced between Keating and Charlie, and finally landed on Todd, who hoped he looked as pleading as he felt.

The seconds passed forever and ever. Todd was horrified that Neil would do something insane now, and the only thing this whole effort had done was catalyze his suicide.

They were interrupted by footsteps coming down the silent hall. It was Dr. Hager, coming to retrieve Neil and suddenly the decision was upon them.

“Mr. Keating,” He acknowledged, then looked toward the boys. “Dalton, what have you done now?”

Charlie looked outraged, but Neil stepped forward before he could say anything. “They were just coming to tell me my father called. He doesn’t want me to participate, so I won’t be needing transportation to the play anymore.”

Dr. Hager eyed Todd and Charlie suspiciously. “Ah. I see. Well then, carry on. I’ll inform Dr. Nolan.”

Todd was hit with a wave of relief. They’d done it, at least this much, to stop him from going. If his father had no reason to get angry at him, he had no reason to kill himself. They’d made it out.

This momentary elation was short-lived, however, because Neil turned back with that look in his eyes, the one Todd knew too well. The look when he came out from between the curtains after the show and met his father’s scowl, or when he followed him out through the theater doors, or when he got in the car.

The rejected agony of the abused dog. The perpetual sacrifice of the obedient son.

“I’m sorry,” Todd blurted softly.

“It’s fine,” Neil shrugged. “I don’t give a damn about any of it.”

“Buck up,” Charlie mumbled at dinner. “We did it.”

Todd didn’t even force a smile. “Doesn’t make me feel any better about it.”

Neil picked at his food but didn’t really eat it. He hadn’t talked much after he got back when Spencer’s class was over, just laid in bed with his back to Todd, flipping absently through The Bible. Todd hated it, hated his quiet and how palpably upset he was. It filled up their whole room until Todd felt like he was properly suffocating.

Actually, nobody was talking much. It felt like the ride back from the theater- everyone in mourning silence, waiting for the status quo to change.

“Tell me about it,” Charlie said. “He won’t even look me in the eye.”

“He won’t remember tomorrow. Neither will you.”

“You don’t think this will work?”

Todd sighed. “I don’t know. I can’t tell. I’ll know tonight.”

“Will you come to me tomorrow?”

He nodded without thinking. He needed the help. The split burden to make it more manageable for him.

“Hopefully I’ll believe you sooner. We didn’t have a lot of time.” He shoved a wad of mashed potatoes in his mouth.

“You’re right,” Todd murmured. “That ate so much time, I’ve got to… you gotta tell me something. Something you absolutely wouldn’t tell anyone ever, some codeword that I can use to get you to believe me. Just in case.”

Charlie nodded adamantly. “That’s a good idea. Let me think.”

“It’s got to be something *no one* knows. Especially not Neil. And something you would certainly never tell me.”

He pondered longer, stabbing as many green beans as he could onto his fork, then wrinkled his nose. “I know what.”

“Okay, tell me.”

“You’re sworn to secrecy, hear me? The only reason I’m even… *thinking* this, is because it’s an emergency. Understand?”

Todd rolled his eyes. He didn’t have the energy for Charlie’s dramatics. “I got it, I got it. What is it?”

Charlie leaned toward him and barely breathed, “ *Bing Crosby.”*

“The singer? What about him?”

“You don’t need to know. But I’ll know what you mean tomorrow, okay?”

“You better.”

“Where are you going?”

Todd hadn’t been asleep- not even close- but the creaking door could have been attributed to waking him up.

“Just for a walk,” Neil whispered. “I need to clear my head.”

He hadn’t expected to be caught. It was obvious in the way he was

standing, in his coat with his hood pulled over his head. Todd, in a moment of panic, wondered if he'd interrupted what was about to the bridge all over again. "Can I come with you?"

"Uh… no."

"Please?"

"I just need a minute. Come find me if I'm not back in half an hour."

Todd wanted to panic, but there was some relief that he told him to come. He'd explicitly said the opposite in the note, and not enough about Neil had changed in this loop to make that dramatic of a change, which meant he probably really was just going for a walk.

It was the longest thirty minutes of Todd's life. He made a point of not watching the clock in hopes that it would go faster, which it didn't, and instead, he just tossed and turned while it counted down. With ten minutes to go, he put on his shoes and paced the small space between their beds, and with five minutes he pulled on his coat.

Not a single second after thirty minutes, he was sneaking out down silent halls and into the freezing night air.

It had snowed. *Again.* Because it always did, which meant that Neil's footprints were obvious and unmarred. His urgency relaxed some as he realized they veered steeply away from the bridge at all.

He walked carefully and deliberately through the snow, creating a nearly identical track to Neil's. He knew where it was leading him; he knew it so well he barely had to look in the early morning darkness.

Neil was sitting at the end of the dock, legs dangled over the icy surface of the lake. He had The Bible with him, clasped in his frozen hands like a lifeline.

Todd stopped right where the grass met the dock. He didn't know exactly where the tripline was that restarted the loop and he didn't necessarily want to risk it.

"It's been half an hour," Todd said softly after a moment, shattering the resounding stillness.

Neil didn't turn around, but he did tip his head back in acknowledgment.

“Come on, let’s go back to bed.”

He didn’t move, and Todd was afraid he was going to have to brave the dock and physically move him back inside, but before he could make up his mind to actually do it, Neil said suddenly, “That was my chance, you know?”

Todd *didn’t* know. He shifted uncomfortably, tucking his hands in his pockets to keep them warm.

“My father called. Said he was proud of me. I guess he went to Henley Hall to check up on me,” He shook his head. “I did what he wanted. I should feel good. I should be fine.”

“But you didn’t do what you wanted,” Todd whispered.

“I should’ve gone,” Neil continued. “I should’ve just gone. What would he have done? He can’t make me any more miserable than I already am.”

But he does, Todd wanted to cry. *He does, he does, he does.*

“I should’ve gone tonight. I should’ve proved that I care about acting more than I care about pleasing him. Maybe then he could see. How badly I want this. But now, it’s like… it’s like I’ve defeated the principle. It wasn’t important enough to go tonight, so it’s not important enough to keep thinking about.” He reeled in his legs and spun around to face Todd, pulling his knees to his chest. “Why do I care so much? I know he wants what’s best for me. I know he loves me. I should just be able to do what he wants, it shouldn’t be so hard for me.”

“This isn’t your fault, Neil,” Todd mumbled gently.

“Keating’s wrong, you know. I won’t be free of him when I graduate. It’s not about my education, it never has been. It’s about *me.* He’s not going to give me agency as soon as I have a diploma. I’m going to be pandering to him for the rest of my life. I can’t escape; I’m trapped.” He laughed once, cynically, and reached up to wipe tears from his eyes. “And I fucked up my one chance to get out.”

Todd didn’t know what to say. He felt inadequately prepared for this situation, and hopelessly inarticulate.

Neil didn’t seem to mind. He held up The Bible. “It’s Whitman.”

“Yeah, I… I know.”

“He’s good. He’s really good. Says ‘ *nothing can happen more beautiful than death.’* I’ve been thinking about that a lot. ”

Todd’s nausea crept slowly into his stomach. “ *I swear to you, there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell.* He says that too.”

“Maybe,” Neil sniffled thoughtfully. “I’d like to see them. His divine things.”

The aching, that crippling hunger rocked into Todd like a lightning strike. He choked on nothing and grabbed his own stomach reflexively like the hole in him was opened by its absence. “I want to help you,” Todd begged. “I want to save you.”

He smiled sadly.

“Tell me what you need. I’ll do it. Anything.” Todd was even surprised by his own sincerity. His own desperation. But the gaping tear in him demanded it, could only be filled by rectifying this situation.

“I just,” Neil looked off into the morning air. “I just… God, it’s hard to say.”

Todd could be patient.

“Will you… I need… *fuck…”*

“I will. Whatever it is.”

Neil dared to meet his eyes where he stood helplessly at the top of the dock. Ready to step out at any moment. It must’ve been Todd’s suffering that gave him the words.

“Will you hold me?”

Todd ran toward him, falling to his knees and sliding in the snow to reach him, clawing desperately to the fibers of his coat. Neil collided with him at the same moment, breath hitching in some terrible sob before he could bury his face against Todd’s pajama shirt, collapsing in his arms.

Todd clung to him, arms around his head to shield him from it all, to envelop him in some sort of warmth and protect him from the universe that seemed to want nothing more than his death. He burrowed into Neil’s hair, sobbing with him, and trying to pull him

closer into him, to meld him in beneath Todd's ribs where he was sure he would be safe.

And for a moment, that agonizing need inside of Todd bottomed out and could only begin to fill upward.

"I can't do it, I can't do it, I can't do it anymore," Neil whined agonizingly, clutching Todd's waist. "I can't go back, I can't face him…"

"You don't have to, I won't make you," Todd gasped. "I won't, I won't, I won't…"

"Make it stop, Todd, God, please, make it go away. I can't do it anymore…"

Todd's last-ditch effort to put Neil out of his misery was to lean over and reach to the end of the dock.

We Were Together; I Forget the Rest

Chapter Notes

Okay y'all if you're reading this as a complete work, this is your obligatory break. Please drink water and go piss girl (gender neutral). If it's after 2 a.m. you should go to sleep, but also... this is finally a happy chapter so I can't really stop you.

My search history after writing this chapter was like:
What did teenagers do in the 50'S
What did teenagers do in the 50's winter
When were movie theaters invented
How much was $200 in 1959
How much was $100 in 1959
How much was $50 in 1959
How much do bikes cost
How much does it snow in Vermont
And then I spent literally like an hour and a half on Taste of Home Magazine: Here's What Christmas Looked Like in the 1950's and the Fisher Price website looking at vintage toys for this chapter.

Anyway I know too much now so enjoy! Be happy because it doesn't lastttttt
Kisses xx

Todd gasped awake to the agonizing cold against his front where Neil had been only moments before. He wrapped his own arms around himself to try and savor the heat, the closeness, but it faded like the morning after a dream until it was blatantly obvious that Todd was very much alone in bed.

He threw the blankets to the side, and rolled out of bed, only to fling his arms around Neil- standing at the wardrobe- almost knocking him off his feet. “Jesus, Todd!” He laughed. “What’s gotten into you?”

Todd just tightened up his face and tried to bury himself in the warm spot of Neil’s neck. Tentatively, Neil’s arms wrapped around him.

“Seriously, are you okay?”

He nodded, slowly pulling away slightly but not completely. “Let’s ditch class.”

Neil stared at him, in even more surprise. “What?”

“Let’s blow class. Just get out of here for the day. Do what *you* want to do. I have $30, we can do whatever you want with it.”

“Todd, are you sick?” He felt along his forehead for a fever but didn’t find anything, of course. “We can’t just-”

“We can! I promise, we can. Let’s just go, before Hager comes in. He’ll think we already went down to breakfast. Get your coat.” He tore away from Neil and started to pull out his clothes.

“Don’t you think McCallister and Keating and Leason and Spencer and every other teacher we’re supposed to see today will notice we’re gone?”

“Sure, but by then we’ll be long gone. They’ll have a hard time finding us, they probably won’t care all that much.”

Neil put his hands on his hips. “We can’t… Todd, they’ll call our parents. If my father finds out I-”

“Your father’s already angry at you, you might as well do what you want.”

He frowned, looking off pensively. Todd had a point, and he knew it. “He won’t let me go to the play. If we ditch, no one will.”

“What if…” Todd sighed. “What if I could promise that there would be no repercussions? No consequences. Just us, and $30, against the world.”

“How could you possibly-”

“Do you trust me?”

Neil paused. He was looking at Todd, who had tripped into his pants and was pulling on a sweater, like he had certainly lost his mind, but he had that familiar start of a smile. The one that longed for something greater. It was the look he’d gotten before restarting the Dead Poets Society, the moment he’d first braved the sentiment of *carpe diem.*

Todd sat on the edge of the bed to pull on his socks and kick his shoes from under the bed, clearly determined to make this work. Neil let his smirk broaden to his eyes, and quickly wrenched the tie from his neck,

throwing it back in the wardrobe and quickly pulling off his collared shirt, to change it for a sweater of his own.

Todd pulled open the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out the Altoids mint tin in the very back. He flipped it open just to ensure that it was still full of cash- it was- then tucked it in his coat pocket as he pulled it on.

Neil finished tying his shoes and checked his watch. “Hager’s down at Stick and Knox’s room, I think, so if we go up toward the office and use those stairs, we’ve got a better chance.”

Todd agreed, and the pair cracked open the door, peering out into the hall. They were close to being right, except Hager was actually across the hall from Knox and Stick, getting after Pitts.

They snuck into the crowded hall- all the boys were coming in and out of their rooms and the bathroom to get ready, and they blended in rather effortlessly. They’d almost made it around the corner when Charlie, coming back from doing his hair- as evidenced by the drop of water trailing down the side of his face- saw them.

“Where the hell are you guys going?” He demanded, quietly enough to not alert Hager. He wasn’t stupid. Or petty, for that matter.

Neil looked very much caught out, but Todd turned around and hissed, “ *Bing Crosby.* Snitch and your secret’s out.”

Charlie’s entire countenance paled, and he looked stunned enough to not say anything as they disappeared into the stairwell.

The rest was easy. There were boys everywhere and few supervisors, so they could get around without looking too conspicuous. Once they burst through the doors and into the fresh air, Todd broke into a run, weaving along the freshly salted cobblestone trails toward the front gates of Welton. Neil chased after him, laughing nervously the whole while.

Once they’d passed the gates and had started to vanish down the road that cut straight through the forest and into town, they slowed from sprinting. Both of them panting heavily in the cold air until their breath poured out like cigarette smoke.

“Oh… my God…” Neil gasped. “We actually… did it.”

Todd nodded, beaming despite himself. “Where do you wanna go?”

“Wherever you do.”

“No, no. We’re not doing this. You choose. That’s the whole point. Whatever you want to do. Just pretend you’re someone else entirely.”

“But-”

“ *Neil.”*

He exhaled thoughtfully, looking up at the trees stretched over them. There was snow tossed gently across the branches like the whole forest had powdered its cheeks. In the blue glow of the morning, the whole thing was rather surreal. “Anything?”

“Anything.”

He tipped his head. “You won’t laugh?”

“‘Course not.”

Neil fought a grin. “Okay, okay, listen. There’s… there’s this toy store, downtown. And it’s all decorated for Christmas, and they’ve got all the hot items to give as presents for the year, and I’ve always wanted to go in and look around, but, uh, it’s sort of impractical, I mean, we’re almost grown-”

“Let’s do it,” Todd agreed instantly.

“You don’t mind?”

“Neil, you could tell me you wanted to have a tea party in the middle of the road here, and I’d find a way to boil water.”

He laughed, lifting his hand from his pocket to lock his arm through Todd’s. “You’re too sweet for your own good.”

The toy store was just as fantastic as Neil had hoped and Todd had imagined. It had barely opened, and most of the clientele was fathers picking out things for their children before they caught the train to work. One man gave them some trouble about not being in school, but Neil lied easily that they went to private school and were already released for winter recess.

Truth be told, there weren’t many toys that they actually wanted, given that they were nearly adults who had had every ounce of

whimsy systematically forced out of them. But it was fun anyway, because they did it of their own volition, and there was a sense of unfamiliar immaturity about it. Besides, Todd liked watching the model trains and looking through the ornate diorama landscapes for the smallest details, and Neil was thoroughly entertained by anything not in a box. He sat at Todd's feet a good while, dismantling an Alice in Wonderland nesting doll to uncover the tiny Alice at the very center, only to pack the characters right back into each other, while Todd muttered to him about the pack of train robber figurines in the dried moss foliage of the landscape.

"Hey, Todd," Neil laughed, snapping nonexistent pictures with a red and yellow Fisher Price camera as they moved on. They arranged a family of Little People in a yellow school bus and raced wind-up cars down the aisles. Todd showed him a magic trick with a deck of cards his uncle had taught him when he was little, and Neil lit up in feigned outrage when he couldn't figure it out.

Todd was looking at a wall of jigsaw puzzles when Neil called for his attention again. He flashed a grin that could've rivaled one of Charlie's and held up a box with a play tea set. "We could have a tea party!"

Todd laughed, shaking his head and returning his attention to the shelves.

"Come on, you said we could! You can't go back on it now."

Which is how Todd found himself at a diner down the street, drinking peppermint tea out of a tiny ceramic teacup with pink flowers painted on it.

"Where'd you even get all this money?" Neil asked, wedging a massive bite of pancakes on his fork.

Todd shrugged, rolling around his Potatoes O'Brien- he hadn't had potatoes in *ages*- and said, "Everyone I know sends me money on holidays, and I never buy anything with it. I've just been saving up for years."

"I guess it's better than a third desk set."

"I guess," He frowned. "It just feels sort of… impersonal. Like my birthday is a box that has to be checked off or something."

Neil sipped dramatically from his own mini teacup, nodding

adamantly. He looked silly, cheeks flushed from being outside in the snow to suddenly enveloped in the warmth of the cafe, and Todd couldn't find it in him to dwell on anything too sad for long.

"More, sir?" Neil held up the teapot- it was a matching set, of course- and refilled his own cup, before leaning over to Todd's before he could answer.

"Thank you very much," Todd echoed his flourishing tone, trying not to laugh.

They almost succeeded, but made eye contact after the exchange and burst into laughter anyway.

They were the only people in the diner for a long while. Their waitress came around now and then to check on them, but quickly realized they were content to just talk to each other for a while, and instead busied herself trying to hang a green tinsel garland above the counter.

An older couple came in after a while, and the waitress managed to climb down from the barstools without falling to take their order. Neil and Todd had enough tea left in the actual-sized teapot they'd ordered to fill the toy teapot and promptly, their two teacups, and were sipping the last bit of warmth when the man turned to them.

"You're… Tom Perry's son, aren't you?"

Neil froze, looking over uncomfortably and pulling up his napkin to wipe his mouth as he swallowed, setting it deliberately to cover the tea set. He was about to say something, but Todd managed to keep his wits about him and interrupted.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken. We've never heard of him."

"That so?" The old man clicked his tongue thoughtfully. "You look so damned familiar. What's your name, boy?"

"James," Neil blurted, then looked surprised at himself for how quickly he'd said it.

"James *Whitman,"* Todd agreed, looking equally surprised.

"Who's your father?"

Neil bit his lip and shot Todd a look. "... Walt Whitman."

The man nodded. “Ah yes, the name sounds familiar. I must know your father. Can’t recall where I’ve heard the name, but…” He waved it off as inconsequential. “Wish your father a Merry Christmas for me.”

“Will do, sir,” Neil reported diligently.

The man continued on to sit at a booth around the corner with his wife.

Neil and Todd sat in silence a moment, before reaching for their teacups at the same time, and caught each other’s sight over the rim, promptly bursting into laughter once again.

“Come on, Jimmy,” Todd chuckled, leaving a few dollars on the table for the waitress, who waved as they walked out.

“Man, Charlie was obsessed with that movie,” Neil rolled his eyes as he propped open the movie theater door for Todd, reaching into the popcorn bag as he passed.

“Really?”

“Yes! He made me come see it with him *three* times over winter holiday the year it came out.”

Todd bit his final piece of licorice in half and handed one side to him. “Why?”

“Who knows? You know Charlie.”

The theater had a matinee special showing Christmas movies, and the pair had made it just in time for *White Christmas.* They were the only people in the theater, because all the teenagers were at school and all the adults were at work, which meant they could talk as much as they wanted.

“What do you want to do?”

Neil made a show of thinking about it, kicking at the snow. “You ever been to the library up on Highland?”

Todd shook his head.

“I guess you’re not from around here, huh? My mom used to take me there when I was a kid. My father worked a lot then; he was still

establishing himself, you know? I think she was lonely. Liked to get out of the house, see the rest of humanity every now and then."

"Is it far from here?"

"No, just up the street and around the corner." They started walking in that direction without thinking about it.

"You don't talk about your mom much."

Neil shrugged. "I don't really talk to her. Not as much as I used to. *You* never talk about your mom."

"Because there's nothing to say. She's too focused on Jeffrey and my sisters most of the time to interact with me. Which, kind of… makes sense. But your mom's just got you."

"I think…" Neil rubbed the dip under his eyebrow. "I think she feels guilty about me."

Todd waited. Usually, he had learned as of late, Neil said something like that, and it was the first time the thought had ever actually occurred to him, so he needed to process it before he could elaborate.

"She was going to be a ballerina…" He mumbled. "But her father wouldn't let her. Said a career would make it hard for her to be a good wife. We're similar, you know. And I think on some level, she knows how I feel, and hates that she can't stop the same thing that happened to her from happening to me."

"Hmm," Todd said, which was inadequate, but he didn't really know what else to say.

"Hmm," Neil agreed decisively.

The snow couldn't seem to decide if it was happening or not, but as they turned the corner, it decided quite suddenly that it, in fact, was. The flakes were thick and wet, and the wind was cold and mean. Slipping through the library doors was a welcome repose from the weather.

Almost immediately, Todd understood why he wanted to come here. It had the dark moodiness of Welton, but didn't feel so empty. Haunted. People didn't just frequent this place; they loved it.

Neil smiled quietly, sight tracing the architecture.

“Is it like you remember?” Todd whispered.

“Almost exactly.” He offered Todd one of the Secret Smiles, and pulled his hand from his coat, holding it out. Todd took it, startled by the warmth of his palm and the softness of his fingers against his own freezing hand.

Neil tugged him toward the back corner. There, like something in a magazine Todd’s mother would read, was a stone fireplace, lit and emanating a soft glow along the rug at the hearth. Neil stopped short- Todd nearly crashing into him- and tipped his head.

“What is it?”

“It looks just like it did when I was a kid.”

A few stacks of books later, and Todd was kicked back perpendicularly in the leather armchair by the fire, an abandoned copy of *Much Ado About Nothing* open in his lap. Neil was lying on the rug on his stomach, reading aloud from a collection of John Keats, frowning with focus as he tried to get through the perfectly antiquated dialect. Every now and then, he paused, looking up through his eyelashes at Todd, cheeks flushed against the blue of his sweater.

“You’re beautiful,” Todd whispered.

“What?”

“It’s beautiful,” He motioned vaguely to the book.

“Well, I’m glad you can make any sense of it,” He sighed dramatically and closed it, sliding it toward the pile of books he’d already worked through. He looked off pensively, then mumbled, “I like this.”

Todd laughed softly. “What?”

“Just all of it. Being here, away from school, and… choosing, and… you.”

The aching in Todd throbbed but didn’t linger. “I like it too.”

Neil rolled onto his back, peering up. “We should do this every day.”

“Okay.”

He grinned, closing his eyes and breathing slowly, inhaling the contentment of the moment.

It didn't last as long as they'd hoped, for in the next half hour, Neil needed to be to Henley Hall for the performance. They begrudgingly pulled on their coats and reshelved the poetry books, nodding vaguely to the decrepit librarian as they trudged out into the snow.

The walk was quiet but not lonely. Both of them kept the morning between them like a dream, like if they spoke of it, they would forget it. Outside the school, they stood too far apart, awkwardly, as if they didn't know what to do now that other people would have to exist inside their world.

"You'll be here tonight?"

"'Course I will," Todd lied.

"Good… Wish me luck?"

"You don't need it."

Todd walked straight from town to the dock with a poorly concealed grin.

Neil pushed the car four spaces. "Wait, is that one mine?"

"It's mine. You owe me $1200."

He looked up. "There's no way."

Todd held out the deed.

"No, no, one house is $450! In what world would I be paying more than a thousand?"

"That's a hotel, not a house. $1200 please."

Neil pushed up off his stomach, nearly upsetting the game board. "It's the cheapest property! How did you do that? I don't even charge that for Boardwalk!"

"I put the hotel on it."

"That's not how you're supposed to play."

"Oh, as opposed to you, buying literally anything you land on and doing nothing with it?"

“Yeah, that’s exactly-”

“Look, if you don’t have $1200, just say that.”

Neil huffed. “I have the money. Jesus!”

“Hush! This is a library,” Todd laughed.

He sorted through the brightly colored money, counting under his breath, finally looking up with, “Okay, listen, Todd.”

He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“I’m your best bud. Best friend. We go way back. And say that something happened to me, and I show up at your… quite luxurious hotel, love what you’ve done with the place, you wouldn’t turn me away. You’re a good man, Todd, you’d help a friend out.”

“None of those words are the ones you need to say,” Todd baited. “It starts with a *B?* Rhymes with *Fankruptcy?”*

Neil’s charming smile dropped and he threw the stack of money at him. “Fine. Bankruptcy. You win.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear that.”

“You win! You win, Todd! Good God!” He tried to seem annoyed, but couldn’t stop the humor from bleeding in until he was laughing so much he could hardly breathe.

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear, Todd!” Neil cried, at the same moment Todd’s voice cracked with the octave as he sang “ *Dear, Neil!”*

They blew the candles out at the same moment, all thirty-six of them- eighteen for both of them- and laughed to each other as they pulled them out to lick the yellow and white frosting from the waxy bases.

The cake was chocolate with a raspberry jam layer, and they sat shoulder to shoulder with two forks, eating it without cutting it. Neil moaned delightedly at the taste, and nodded adamantly, “Excellent choice.”

Todd agreed, too much in his mouth to say anything coherent.

“I haven’t had a cake in years.”

“Me neither.”

“When it really is my birthday, I’ll get a cake just like this and we can eat it in the cave with the boys.”

“That’s months away.”

“Only four.”

“Five.”

“Four!” Neil counted off on his fingers. “January, February, March, April. Four.”

“Yeah, but we’ve still got to finish December.”

He pulled one of the candied cherries from the whipped cream and bit it off the stem. “December’s like, half over.”

“It’s only been that long?” Todd shook his head. “Alright, we make it to April and I’ll buy you a cake twice the size of this one.”

“Deal.” Neil beamed.

“More tea, Mr. Whitman?” The tea-set had made its appearance once again.

Neil held out his cup, smirking suavely. “Why, thank you, Mr. Anderson.”

“I don’t want to be an Anderson. If you get to be Whitman, I get to be someone cool too.”

“Fair enough. Who do you want to be?”

Todd thought it over, spinning a tiny flowered spoon in his tea and biting his lip. “I… can’t think of anything.”

“Well, you can be Mr. Whitman too.”

“We can’t *both* be Whitman.”

“Sure we can! Who says? More sugar, Mr. Whitman?”

Todd fought a smile endearingly. “Yes please, Mr. Whitman.”

Todd had barely looked off long enough to make sense of the horizon when the rough snow met his raw face. He froze, trapped in the related sensation of nausea and Charlie’s hot hands, and he panicked despite himself.

“Whoa, are you okay?” Neil was expecting a more cordial reaction.

Todd’s chest relaxed. The air filtered in and out of his lungs as it was meant to again and the discomfort of the snow melted with it. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just… shocked. That I could be so *horribly* betrayed by my *best friend.”*

Neil cackled, throwing his head back as he kept walking. Todd stooped to tie his shoe, watching him walk away, and letting a bit of distance grow between them.

“You coming?”

“Yeah, yeah, hold up.” Todd’s shoe was never actually untied. He reached along the grass and wedged himself a decent snowball, finally straightening up and jogging to catch up with Neil.

He dropped it in his hood and promptly swung it up over his head, so the snow went tumbling down his hair and against his warm neck. Neil gasped in surprise, cussing out something indecipherable and shaking like a dog to get it off. “Oh, that was dirty! Jesus, Todd, did Charlie teach you that?”

“Something like that,” He murmured playfully.

Todd came out of the shower, ruffling his hair dry with one of the hotel’s embroidered towels. It was a nice hotel, one too fancy for teenage boys, but the lady at the front desk had seen their Welton coats and knew they came from rich families, so she didn’t question it too much.

Neil was kicked back on the bed, flipping through channels on the staticky box TV and he smiled fondly as Todd clambered next to him.

“I ordered room service. I didn’t know what you wanted, so I got some

of everything."

"Anything but meatballs," Todd mumbled, falling back into the softness of the plush, white pillows.

"You don't like meatballs? I don't mind meatballs."

"If you had 'em as much as I have, you would."

"Well, I don't think they have meatballs, but next time they give them to us at school, I'll eat yours. Promise." He held up his pinky.

Todd linked his through it. "Perfect."

And as the afternoon crept on, having properly gorged themselves, they laid facing each other with the thin top sheet pulled over their heads like some make-shift blanket fort.

For a moment it was silent- heavy and lethargic- and Neil shifted to get comfortable, socked feet rubbing the peek of Todd's ankle that wasn't quite covered by his slacks. Their knees knocked gently, soft and warm and intimate beneath the sheets, and when Neil's chest hitched with a yawn, his sweater brushed Todd's.

"I love this," Neil murmured sleepily.

"What?"

"Being with you."

And for a moment, the wound in Todd cried out for some sense of salve, begging its host for something to satiate it. It lurched forward inside him, and against his control, he reached out to cup Neil's cheek gently, thumb tracing the contour of his jaw.

Neil tipped forward, so his forehead rested firmly against Todd's, tips of their noses meeting barely and warm breath mingling in the minute space between them.

"We should do this every day..." He breathed, words ghosting over Todd's lips like he'd said them himself.

"I do," Todd murmured. "It's been two weeks."

Neil was asleep enough to miss the admission. But it felt good for Todd to acknowledge it out loud anyway.

The Tuesday before yesterday, he'd gone to Keating's room to get The Bible before going to the dock. Something was festering in him, something growing on the edge of the hole in him, that had started to eat at the infected edges and begin to heal when he was with Neil. Like this precious, stolen time with Neil was the solution to fixing whatever had happened inside him. He'd needed Whitman to comprehend that fully.

As always, the madman poet articulated perfectly.

Day by day and night by night we were together–all else has long been forgotten by me.

I Don't Believe I Deserved My Friends

Todd came to slowly, blearily thinking that, in the disorientation, he was still in the hotel bed. He reached for Neil again, vaguely and thoughtlessly but met the cold air of the dorm.

That's right.

He opened his eyes, squinting against the morning blinding through the window. For a moment, he prepared himself for the speech, for the persuasion that got Neil running with him, as he had for days and days. He lingered just long enough that the moment they could sneak out without too much difficulty passed. Todd pulled himself from bed regardless.

Neil turned around absently as he knotted his tie, acknowledging Todd's movement, but not saying anything. Today felt like an earlier morning than the last sixty consecutive Tuesdays, and there was no need to break the silence immediately. Instead, Neil winked. Todd smiled despite himself.

"Good morning, Mr. Whitman," He murmured, crossing behind him, arm stretched so he could pat Neil's neck affectionately as he passed.

Neil was surprised, of course, but grinned as if it was nothing out of the ordinary, awkwardly grabbing Todd's wrist as it left his shoulders. "Good morning."

Todd slipped into the hall.

"Where are you going?"

He knocked on Charlie and Cameron's door, wiping the rest of his short-lived sleep from his eyes.

Charlie wrenched it open, clearly having just woken up and more than a little peeved about it, hair sticking up every which way. "This better be- Todd?"

"I need to talk to you."

"Man, what did Neil do?"

Todd must've looked as confused as he felt.

Charlie continued, "In what situation would *you* not talk to Neil, and come to *me* instead? Unless Neil had done something. What was it?"

"He didn't do anything."

"Then what's this about?"

Todd sighed. "I'm stuck in a time-loop."

"You're… *what?"* Charlie cocked an eyebrow.

"You know how today is Tuesday? Well, yesterday was Tuesday too, and the day before that was Tuesday, and it's been Tuesday for a very long time."

"Yesterday was Monday."

"For you. You… God, uh, no one remembers the extra Tuesdays except me. You guys all start over every time."

"Did Knox set you up to this? I thought you were better than that, Todd. Come on, man."

"I'm serious! I… I can prove it."

"Sure you can. I'd love to see that." Charlie crossed his arms and leaned back.

"I've told you about this before. In another loop. You helped me-"

"I don't remember that."

Todd rolled his eyes. " *Of course* you don't remember it. We wouldn't have this problem. But last time, you told me something you've never told anyone so that I would be able to prove it this time around."

Charlie smirked expectantly.

"Bing Crosby."

Any trace of smug humor melted off his face. He straightened up and coughed uncomfortably. "What… *uh,* what does that even mean?"

"You know what it means."

He set his jaw. “I don’t know who told you about that-”

“It was you.”

“-But it’s not funny to bring it up and-”

“You told me! I don’t even know what it means, but you said you would! And clearly, you do. So can we cut the bullshit, and you help me out now? I’m stuck in a time loop. Last time you called it the Meatloop.”

“Why would I- I’m sorry *the what?* What the *fuck* is a Meatloop?”

“Meatball Timeloop,” Todd said solemnly.

“ *Meatball?”* Charlie looked off to the side incredulously, like someone would be there to agree that this was insanity.

“Yeah, there’s like… *so many* meatballs.”

“Todd,” Charlie stopped walking, taking hold of Todd’s shoulders and looking him dead in the eye. “You’re a good man. You’re sensible. You’ve got a decent head attached to the rest of you. You’re mature. You’re… relatively normal. Which is why I have no choice but…” He sighed. “To believe you. What do you need from me?”

Todd let out a breath in relief. He thought it over, trying to figure out what Charlie could even do, but he wasn’t even totally sure why he decided this was the loop to talk to him again. “I don’t know yet.”

“Okay, get me caught up.”

“Tried it.”

Charlie slammed his head down on the table. They’d migrated from the dorm halls to McCallister’s empty classroom once again. It was always empty in the mornings, and Todd went there naturally.

“I don’t know! That’s literally every idea I would’ve had, plus some. I’ve got nothing.”

“You’ve got to have something! Just think!”

“I’m thinking! I don’t have a solution, Todd!”

Todd chewed anxiously on his pinky nail. His whole head was spinning, running through simulations of the evening to track their outcomes. No matter how wildly different the hours played out, they always ended the same.

Neil's dead.

"I don't know if I can do it again."

Charlie propped his head up. "What do you mean? You have to. You're the only one that can fix it."

Todd shook his head. "You don't understand. I've grieved him so many times, there's no strength left in me. I feel like someone's beaten my feelings with a baseball bat. I don't want to try again, because I don't want to have to fail again. I'm just… exhausted. Hopeless."

Charlie frowned. "I'm not. Sure, it's been a lot for you, but now you got me. I'm the hope."

"We're doomed," Todd muttered miserably, facedown on the table.

"Okay, fuck you, first of all, and second of all, we just need to think. Right? Cause, listen, me and you have like, nothing in common. But me and Neil have stuff in common, and *you* and Neil have stuff in common, so Neil's just the average of us two. Half of me and half of you equals a whole Neil."

"What are you even saying?"

"I'm saying we have the answer. Somewhere between us. We've just got to figure it out. Come on, we're Welton men. We're some of the brightest kids in the country. We can do it."

"But what if, what if we can't? What if we're not just making us suffer, but Neil too? That's not fair! I *know*- for sure- that if we don't mess with the loop, I can time it to ensure Neil gets time to be alive. I've just done it fifteen loops in a row."

"That's bullshit!" Charlie threw his hands up. "Okay, yeah, so he gets 12 hours to do what he wants. But it's the same 12 hours over and over again, he's not actually *living* anything. His life is still being decided for him, it's just you that's doing it."

"It's not ideal, sure! I know that. But at least it's *something.* The same 12 hours is better than no hours. And it's totally different from his

father because I actually care about him and want to give him what he wants. He's trapped, but so what? We're all trapped, all the time. But we can make the enclosure better. So if it's that or him being dead, then I think we should stick to what we can guarantee gives him time!"

"Shouldn't it be his choice? Why are we deciding for him?"

"Because we know what he chooses. Because he shoots himself in the head, Charlie. He's not in his right mind. And I can't stand to live in a world without him because of one stupid choice he makes when I could stop him from ever getting to that point. If Neil has no future, neither do I."

Charlie didn't have anything to say to that immediately. He stared up at Todd, eyebrows knit. "Sounds like something Knox would say about Chris."

Todd sighed angrily.

"Maybe worse…" Charlie leaned forward and squinted. "You're not in love with Neil, are you?"

Every ounce of oxygen in Todd's body expelled all at once, and he choked on nothing.

Charlie, through much hard work and dedication, had completely devoted himself to an endless and incomparable throne of bullshit, whose courts Todd frequented. And still, even as the question came directly from the prophet himself, Todd was shocked by how genuine it felt. It was insensitive, really, to accuse him of something so tragic and plausible.

Whatever semblance of rational thought Todd possessed at some point prior to the question being spoken aloud came crashing down like Rome after a day, and the wound began to expand inside out until it would surely devour Todd whole. Because, as soon as he had comprehended the question, there came a million and one flashes of memories- of bits of Neil- his grin, the warmth of his breath, his dimple, the streak in his left eye, the feel of his socks on Todd's leg, his laugh, the caress of his voice on Todd's name- and as they washed over him, Todd was struck with the resounding answer.

Yes.

"No!" Todd cried defensively, voice cracking in anguish. "No, of, of

course not!"

Charlie's expression expanded excitedly. "You do, don't you? My god, you should see your face! You do! I knew it! I knew you were gay!"

Todd felt the floor and the wall switch places. He shoved up on the table to get to his feet, swaying nauseously. Every thought he tried to form was cut off suddenly, and his chest heaved with a breath he couldn't get in. He was stuck in this room, with Charlie, who had exposed something he hadn't even found himself, and he was going to suffocate actually.

He pulled frantically on his tie, trying to loosen it from around his neck, trying to restore the path from nostril to lung, but the sheer pressure in his head prevented it. His eyes watered, burning with the sensation of the panic, and still, his dull nails clawed at his throat to get real air.

Todd tripped away from the study hall, into the mostly empty hall, looking frantically for someplace to escape, someplace where he could go back to being sheltered and in denial.

"Todd!" Charlie called, chasing after him desperately. "Todd, I'm sorry, come back! Todd!"

Todd could hardly hear it, sounds coming to him like they were being filtered through water before they made it to his ears, and the deafening sound of his pulse throbbing up his skull. If he'd had the potential to form a coherent thought, he would've guessed this was what fight or flight felt like, and he was choosing flight.

As almost an afterthought, his sprint skidded to a halt outside a coat closet in the hall, which he wrenched open and ducked inside, falling immediately into the back corner where he could curl in on himself as tight as he possibly could.

Still, his useless fingers fidgeted with the tie, desperate to free himself of it, to inhale something with some sustenance.

Charlie yanked the door open and sighed in relief, dropping to his knees to crawl into the closet next to him. He slid his fingers under the door to close them inside and reached over to actually get the tie off, so Todd could stop scratching himself, taking special care to undo the top button of his shirt.

"Put your head between your knees," He said gently, patting Todd's

back.

Todd squeezed his temples between his kneecaps, like if he pressed hard enough he could pop his head like a bad pimple and free the pressure overtaking him. He did manage to gasp in enough to fully inflate his chest, and it felt so good, he stopped shaking so horribly. The tears, however, were uncontrollable, streaming down his face pathetically and soaking into his shirt, as pants turned into sobs.

“I shouldn’t have said that, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Charlie rambled, rubbing his back consolingly. “I should’ve waited till you figured it out, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t’ve… I’m sorry, Todd, I’m sorry.”

After a minute, Todd had to lift his head to cough the snot from his throat, and Charlie dug anxiously in his pocket for a handkerchief to give him, so he could blow his nose. The crying hadn’t stopped, but it wasn’t pouring from his face anymore, and he sucked in a shuddery breath.

“I’m sorry,” Charlie whispered, sounding properly miserable. “I’m so sorry.”

Todd swallowed the moisture building at the back of his mouth, and even though it was irrational and easily answered by the situation, whispered as smally as he could manage, *“Do you hate me?”*

Charlie’s face fell. “No! No, Todd, of course not! Why would I…?” He trailed off despairingly.

Todd kept his face pressed to his knees. “Because I am. I’m… I’m…”

“In love with Neil?” Charlie offered softly at the same moment he choked out, “ *Gay.”*

“Oh.” He laughed once, delicately and nervously. “It would be kind of silly if I hated *you* for that…”

Todd sniffed, wiping his nose with the handkerchief. “What do you mean?”

“Todd…”

Todd just kept looking at him expectantly in the dark, but Charlie didn’t say anything, just sort of stared back with an imploring grimace.

“You mean, you’re…”

Charlie nodded.

Todd swallowed. “Is that the thing with Bing Crosby?”

He laughed again, more unrestrained this time. “Yeah. Yeah, I’ve got kind of a thing for him.”

“Bing Crosby?”

“Don’t give me that. Have you seen that movie *White Christmas?* He’s kinda… I don’t know.”

He had, in fact, seen that movie, however in his memory, Bing Crosby was of less importance than Neil leaning over to whisper to him. Todd laughed wetly, wiping at his eyes. “That… explains a lot.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t put it together. You watched me shove a meatball so far into my mouth I choked on it how many times and it didn’t once occur to you that maybe I’m not exclusively into girls?”

“I didn’t put it together when it was happening in my own head,” Todd defended lightly.

They both sat there a moment, curled in the dark on the floor, listening to people pass the outside of the closet.

Finally, Charlie exhaled loudly and dragged a hand down his face. “It feels good to say it out loud. I’ve never told anyone.”

“Not even Neil?”

“No, it… never really came up.”

“Oh God.” Todd felt the panic start to rush back in. “Oh God, Neil. He’s never going to forgive me. He’s going to hate me forever, I can’t… He can’t know, he’ll be so angry.”

“Todd, calm down.”

“He’ll never forgive me!”

“No, he won’t. Because there’s nothing to forgive.” Charlie grinned. “Two springs ago, he had this same meltdown. Laid in my bed all night, sobbing, because Ginny Danbury kissed him during the dance and he didn’t feel a thing. Took me *forever* to talk him down.”

“Really?” Todd mumbled like he was afraid to hope.

“Really.”

Todd nodded placidly. After a second, he asked the follow-up question that really mattered to him. “What if he still is angry? Be… Because it’s *me.”*

Charlie rolled his eyes. “I have not watched you two eye-fuck each other across the dinner table for the last four months for you to worry he doesn’t like you back.”

“We do *not!”*

“Yes, you do.”

Todd laughed, really, overwhelmed with some intense ecstasy at the connection with Charlie. Of course, Charlie was his friend, he always had been, but this was deeper than that. They were brothers, bonded in this moment.

“Is that why you don’t like Chris?”

Charlie made a face. “Ooh, hush. I’m not *that* self-actualized. I’m still working through that one.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Todd shrugged. “You won’t remember this in the morning.”

And Charlie threw his head back to laugh, in a way only Charlie did, and suddenly the crushing weight of *everything* compacting Todd at every moment eased off and became manageable.

Probably because now he was sure Charlie could help carry it.

He smiled softly at his shoes as Charlie reached for the doorknob. “Come on, Romeo, let’s get out of the closet.”

Todd was almost asleep.

Charlie was sitting on the radiator in his and Neil’s room, smoking and humming to himself.

Todd had collapsed in bed upon returning from the closet heist, properly exhausted from the successive argument/panic attack/sob

fest, on top of the normal fatigue of the loop. He hadn't slept eight hours in months and it was really starting to catch up with him.

"I'm going to fight him," Charlie said suddenly.

Todd didn't open his eyes but mustered a confused sound.

"Mr. Perry. I'm gonna fight him."

Todd sat up. "What?"

"I don't know. Maybe if he sees how much I care about Neil, he'll give him some grace. Or maybe if I just act insane in comparison, he'll see how good he's got it with Neil as his son."

"What are you even talking about?" Todd rubbed the bridge of his nose. "He'll beat your ass."

"Yeah, probably. We gotta do what we gotta do. I can take it."

"Charlie, you're still sore from Nolan coming after you."

"Yeah, and I handled that just fine. And Nolan's a total sadist. I don't have to worry about that from Tom."

"No, that's-"

"I'm gonna do it. You can't stop me."

"It's not going to work."

Charlie shrugged. "We haven't tried it. You came to me for ideas, and I've got one. It's my turn to try. I mean, if it doesn't work, you end the loop early and I'm fine tomorrow morning. We've got nothing to lose."

Todd didn't have the strength to argue with him. He laid back down and rolled onto his side, back to Charlie, to try and get some sleep before it was time to go.

"Where are you going?" Charlie threw his hands up.

Todd waved it off. "I've got to take care of something. Don't worry about it."

He tripped downstairs, trying to make it to the main entrance before

the boys came down from the bathroom. Normally, Charlie would be up there 'getting red,' but this time around he skipped out on that bit.

Todd pushed out through the steel doors into the night. He knew exactly what he was looking for; he had the timing just right. He knew this night better than his own hands.

"Chris!"

The girl stopped, looking up from where she watched her feet while trudging through the snow. She was coming to get Knox, just like she always did.

"Chris, you gotta get out of here."

"I'm sorry, have we met?"

"Not really, no, but I'm Knox's friend. I know who you are. Listen, Knox is in big trouble, if you come in, he'll be expelled. You have to go home."

She looked up at the school in surprise. "What happened?"

"Come on, you think the school gave him permission to come find you this morning? He snuck off campus. He's in deep shit."

She nodded. "Okay. Okay, I'll go back. Tell him I came though. Tell him Chet's gonna kill him if he tries to find me again."

Todd agreed, slipping back inside before the other boys had made it downstairs. Charlie had a questioning look, but Todd shrugged to get him to drop it.

If Charlie was going to help him get Neil, the least he could do was take out the thing keeping Charlie from Knox.

"I do *not* get it," Charlie whispered to Todd, grinning like a menace.

It took Todd a minute to tear his sight from Neil. It was different to watch it this time; there was a difference between admiring someone you were falling in love with and someone you *knew* you were in love with. "Of course you don't. He's like your brother. Pretend he's Bing."

Charlie's smile straightened and he went to scratch the corner of his eye, flipping Todd off. "You're lucky I like you. Damn straight I'm his

brother, and I could get you out of the picture soooo easily. I'd give you a shovel talk, but I don't think there's a bad bone in you. Well, not yet anyway. Given your… preferences-"

"Do *not* finish that sentence, Dalton."

He smirked blindingly.

"He's good," Knox muttered, leaning over Charlie. "He's really good."

"Hmm, normally you say that," Todd mused.

And in Puck's last monologue, Charlie and Todd were the first ones on their feet to applaud, Charlie yanking Knox up to join them, and all of them yawped together. "How sick of watching that are you?" Charlie laughed.

"Not at all," Todd mumbled.

"You're hopeless."

The rest was the blur it always was. Crowds and noise and a few hundred people filtering through two single doors. But then they were there again, standing on the sidewalk while Neil's father tried to force him into the car, and he looked miserable. It had been a while since Todd had seen it. It was worse than he remembered.

"Neil! Neil! Mr. Perry, come on!" Charlie cried, even as Keating tried to hold him back, and Todd flinched preemptively, so he could miss the exact moment that Charlie got himself free to hit Tom. He heard the slap but looked back too soon, so he didn't miss Tom's fist coming back to deck Charlie in retaliation.

"Father!" Neil yelled in horror.

Charlie stumbled backward, reeling toward Knox, who managed to catch him somewhat and push him back into balance.

"Get in the car, Neil."

Todd wasn't thinking. Neil was upset and Todd was going to fail again and have to watch him die again, and he'd done so good avoiding it, he didn't want to have to do it again. Tom was pulling away, turning onto the straightaway to accelerate.

He jumped in front of the car.

Todd had never been hit by a car before. It wasn't fun. He wasn't even sure what exactly had happened, except that he had been standing, and then he was laying on the snow, staring up at the sky, and his entire body felt like he'd been run through a set of gears.

"Oh my God!" Neil cried, trying to get out of the car, trying to get to him and Todd was so embarrassed that he had to see this, that he didn't even try to get off the ground. The shame was actually worse than the injury. And he was pretty sure he'd broken a rib.

"Neil, stay in the car!"

"It's okay, Neil, I've got him, I've got him!" Charlie's bloody face and crooked nose appeared in Todd's vision.

"Control your boys, Keating!"

"What the fuck was that, Todd?"

Todd moaned painfully and closed his eyes.

Knox walked them to the infirmary, which looked more like Pitts and him carrying Todd while Charlie trailed behind. He sat there next to Charlie, who was surely expelled now, with a bandage to set his nose and blood dried down his face and his blue dress shirt, black eye festering. Todd was on a considerable amount of some numbing analgesic, laying there feeling like a teenage-boy-shaped bruise.

Keating came into the silent room. "I don't even… what were you…?"

"It's a long story," Todd and Charlie said in unison.

"I don't think I can get you out of this."

"'S fine," Charlie mumbled absently. "You won't remember in the morning."

Todd laughed morbidly.

"Come on, boys. This is serious."

"It's really not."

Keating left The Bible to entertain them- Todd was grateful for it- and took Knox to bed.

“Do you see why I’m exhausted?” Todd asked, lolling his head to face Charlie. “Do you see why I want to give up?”

“Yeah. That sucked. Doesn’t mean you can give up though.”

“We’re never going to figure it out,” He was nearly positive now that the problem was that the universe had chosen him to complete this Sisyphean task. Almost prayerfully, he thought, *can't it be someone else? Does it have to be me?*

He opened The Bible, desperate for any sort of wisdom from Uncle Walt. Anything he could use to get them out of this.

Not I, nor anyone else can travel that road for you. You must travel it by yourself.

Dammit.

Todd sighed, whispering to himself, “ *I don’t want to do it, Walt. I can’t do it.”*

It is not far. It is within reach.

“What’s wrong?” Charlie asked, reading over his shoulder.

“The Bible says we’re close. That we can do it.”

“Well, there you have it.” He grinned, and it split his lip, which made him wince.

Todd half-smiled despite himself. “But how? How do we get from… whatever that was, to making it actually work?” *How do I become what Neil needs?*

He closed The Bible, taking a deep breath, before opening to a random page.

I have learned that to be with those I like is enough.

Right.

He looked to Charlie, wiping the bead of blood from his lip onto the sleeve of his ruined shirt, looking incredibly worse for the wear, and he thought of other loops, when Meeks asked what Todd was doing so he wouldn’t be left alone, and Knox burying his wet face into Todd’s back, and Pitts ignoring the insanity of Todd barging into his room while he was half-dressed. He thought of them trailing him into the

snow when he vomited, and standing on their desks with him when he stood up to Nolan. The afternoons in the cave when Todd was too anxious to read, but they didn't mind him spectating. The dinners where they talked too loudly in the dining hall and when McCallister scolded them, it was as a group. All of them in the same row in the theater yawping in sync for Neil. Hunched over the counter eating meatballs.

It was clear, quite suddenly.

"We have to tell the others."

Charlie raised his eyebrows. "You think so?"

He nodded. "We're a team. All of us. A society. Of course we have to do it together."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Todd struggled to his feet, feeling like he was chewed up and spit out, everything below the waist tingling absurdly with the medicine. But it didn't matter anymore, because there were things to be done. "I need to get to the dock."

"Can you walk?"

Todd let go of the bed and fell to the ground.

Charlie nodded promptly, helping hoist him back to his feet. He pulled his arm around his shoulders, supporting him like a drunk man, and walking the both of them quietly out through the doors and into the snow. It was slow going, and Todd wished they'd just given him aspirin so he could still feel his legs and he could just walk.

Charlie- on request- deposited him a foot from the edge of the dock. He groaned carefully as he lowered him, then shook off the weight in his shoulders.

"Thank you," Todd said. "For everything."

Charlie gave his signature smirk. "'Of course. We're blood-bonded now."

"I'm glad it's you." Todd was surprised by how much he meant it. "Listen, tomorrow… do you want me to tell you I know?"

“About Bing Crosby?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ll have to tell you again, so I don’t want to take away your chance to tell me.”

“Pretend you don’t know.” Charlie put his hands in his pockets and kicked a rock off the dock. It thudded onto the surface of the frozen lake loudly. “You’re a good one, Todd.”

“So are you. Despite what everyone says. And thinks. And how you act.”

Somehow, his smile got wider. “Alright, alright, enough sappy shit. My face is killing me. Let’s reboot this bad boy so I can get my money-maker back. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” Todd laughed, lying back, and reaching for the end of the dock.

Storming, Enjoying, Planning, Loving, Cautioning

Chapter Notes

> This is a Meeks appreciation chapter and how chaotic can Charlie get

Thank the Meatloop gods, Todd could feel his legs.

He wasn't sure what kind of biological processes happened to him when he restarted a loop, but whatever it was this time around had thoroughly metabolized whatever meds he was on, and he felt terrible. The effects of being hit by a motorized vehicle had caught up to him, and everything hurt, but he couldn't even manage to be upset about it.

It is within reach.

"Neil," He muttered, trying to untangle himself from his blankets. "Neil."

Neil looked over from the wardrobe, hands on his tie. "You okay?"

"Do you have aspirin?"

He nodded, pulling open a desk drawer, and dug out a box of Bayer. He passed it to Todd and grabbed the water glass off the desk to offer him. Todd choked down the tablets with the stale water.

"Headache?"

"Something like that."

"Do you need me to get the nurse?"

Todd shook his head. "I just need to talk to Charlie."

"Charlie? What's he got to do with it?" Neil crouched, elbows propped on the bed.

"Have you ever gotten a headache that wasn't somehow caused by Charlie?"

Neil laughed. It was beautiful.

“I missed you,” Todd murmured. “Hardly saw you yesterday.”

“What do you mean? We were together all day! I was only gone for rehearsal.”

Todd just laughed it off. It wasn’t like he could explain. “Still wasn’t enough. I hate when you’re away.”

“I hate to be away…”

Todd could hardly stand it when he did that, when he looked up at him with those endless, wide eyes. He wanted to lean forward and press his lips to the spot where his eyebrows met his nose, just to see how his eyelashes would flutter and the pink flush would rush into his cheeks, but he didn’t. He had to keep him alive before he could have him.

Hager pounded on the door, to remind them they were meant to be getting ready for class, and it properly startled both of them, as if they had forgotten they weren’t the only two people in the world.

Todd didn’t fully believe Charlie’s *eye-fuck theory,* mostly because he’d never had any reason to believe that Neil thought Todd was near as precious as Todd thought *he* was, and it all just felt too good to be true. That someone as radiant and unmistakable as Neil could manage to develop a fondness for a mess like Todd.

But, that was it, wasn’t it? Because Neil was a mess too. Because there was so much wrong in their lives and so little they could do to fix it.

And, while Todd turned his sight from the door and back to Neil, he realized Neil was already looking at him.

And he wondered.

“The *Meatloop?”*

“Your words, not mine.”

“How in the world would that come out of my mouth organically?”

Todd rolled his eyes. “That’s not even in the top five of weird shit you’ve said to me in the last few loops. We have bigger problems.”

It only took a little more back and forth before he’d won him over.

Either Todd was getting better at explaining or Charlie was getting more gullible, and Todd genuinely couldn't tell you which it was.

"So, we decided last night, that we need to get the rest of the poets involved. We need as many problem-solvers on this as we can get."

"Yeah, okay," Charlie got to his feet- they hadn't even made it out of his dorm room this morning. "I'll go get Knox."

"I bet you will," Todd mumbled to himself.

Charlie came back in less than ten minutes, with not only Knox but Meeks and Pitts too. "Gang's all here."

"Todd, what is this?" Meeks asked, looking over at Charlie with half-amused annoyance.

"I need to tell you something." This was the hard part. Convincing Charlie was one thing; convincing the others was quite another. "It's gonna sound crazy, I know. But you gotta believe me."

Meeks and Pitts shot each other a side-eyed glance, coming fully into the room and sitting on the floor between the beds. Knox hovered near Charlie in the doorway, even after the door closed behind them.

"I'm in a time-loop. Today is Tuesday, and yesterday was Tuesday, and tomorrow is gonna be Tuesday too."

Again, they shared incredulous looks.

"I know. I know how it sounds. But it's been Tuesday for a very long time, and I've had to explain this so many times, and I'd really like it if you could just trust me. We don't have time to argue too much."

"Where's Neil?" Pitts asked finally.

"That's the thing," Charlie said. "Tell 'em."

Todd sighed. "That's why I'm in the loop. Because tonight, after the play, Neil goes home with his father and… he *dies."*

"That's kind of fucked up to joke about," Meeks muttered, rubbing his face beneath his glasses. "Did Charlie put you up to this? Whatever he's threatening you with is not worth-" he motioned vaguely. "-this."

"No, Charlie didn't do anything. The only reason Charlie knows is because I've told him before. I knew he would believe me, and I…

needed help."

"I told him a code word," Charlie explained, sounding immensely proud of himself. "About my deepest, darkest secret, and the only way he would've known it is if I told him. He's telling the truth."

"I have calculus." Meeks stood up. "Maybe later, guys."

"I have a test in civics. Sorry, Todd," Pitts agreed after a moment, starting to follow him.

"No, come on. It won't work unless it's all of us… Knox?"

He looked up guiltily. "I have lab…"

"Come on, man," Charlie begged, but he just shrugged noncommittally. "Guys! What the hell!"

"It's okay," Todd mumbled. "I wouldn't believe me either."

"No! No, it's not okay. Because even if you didn't believe it, you would still stick around to do what you could to help. You wouldn't walk out because you just *had* to get to class. Especially if you thought for even a *single* second that maybe Neil could be in danger. Fine, don't believe me. You don't even have to believe Todd. But could you all just play along long enough that we figure out a way to save Neil? If this was swapped with any of you, you know Todd would at least hear you out."

"Charlie, really-"

"I'm serious."

"We should at least hear the whole story," Knox muttered to the other two. "They seem really upset. They wouldn't joke about something like that."

This didn't have the intended effect, and both Meeks and Pitts took a step closer to the door.

That was the final straw, and something in Charlie snapped. "I swear to God, you walk out of this room and Nuwanda will get an article in the paper about what I saw you two doing in the nonfiction section in the library. Get your asses over there and do what Todd tells you to."

Instantly, both of them turned around and returned to their spots on the floor. "Alright," Meeks muttered. "We're playing."

Todd made the note to get Charlie a really, really good Christmas present if they ever made it past the 15th.

Todd handed everyone a piece of paper and a pen. “Alright, I need five ideas from all of you and we’ll work out what we have and haven’t tried. Here’s the timeline.”

“Charlie, please shut up,” Knox groaned.

They’d separated them between the two cells. Meeks, Charlie, and Todd were in one, with Knox and Pitts in the other, but the only thing that physically stood between them was a row of bars. Things had gone… poorly.

Well, it had started out fine. They’d gone through with the play like they normally did- with the exception that Knox came with them instead of sticking around to see Chris- and after it was over, they’d shotgunned meatballs like their lives depended on it, before sneaking out through the kitchens and walking all the way to Neil’s house.

That’s when things started to get rocky, as they tried to find a way inside, and everything had happened too quickly. Tom had heard them, called the police, and the gunshots had rung through the night before they could even get to Neil.

All of them had been arrested for trespassing, and even though cops were there so much sooner, Neil was already dead.

The problem was, they were stuck in the county jail, and Todd had no way to get back to the dock to try again.

Todd pulled his pant leg up to look at the messy list on his calf. They’d gone back to taking notes on him, to remember what had and hadn’t been tried and why it didn’t work. “What are we gonna try next time?”

“What next time?” Pitts muttered. “We’re not getting out of here anytime soon.”

“It’s trespassing,” Charlie rolled his eyes. “Not murder.”

Meeks made a thoughtful noise. “Have we tried killing Tom?”

“Mmm,” Todd thought. “No, not yet.”

“ *Why* would we try that?” Knox demanded in incredulous horror.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Charlie murmured. “Not it.”

“Not it.” Pitts and Knox echoed instantly.

“I’ll do it, Todd. My father was in the trenches during the war; he’s got a complex over killing people. Used to take me hunting all the time. I’m good with a gun.” Meeks said, sounding anything but.

“Regardless, we’re still stuck in this goddamn cell,” Pitts murmured.

He had a point.

It was late, and slowly the boys dropped off to sleep, sprawled and curled in assorted places on the tile floor. Todd, however, stayed awake.

Sometime in the morning, around when Charlie normally came into Todd’s room to break the news, Todd lifted his head from his pensive half-awake coma to the sound at the door of the cell.

“Chris?” He mumbled, blinking blearily. “What are you…?”

“Hi,” She whispered.

“Knox,” He reached through the bars to shake him awake. “Knox, wake up.”

He shot up, mumbling something about chemistry homework, rubbing his face, and sitting up. “Chris?!”

This woke up the rest of them until they were all staring at her in shock. Knox crossed over to the bars, inches away from her, but perpetually kept apart.

“I went to Welton to see you,” She explained shyly. “Chet’s been so angry, and I… I wanted to tell you to stay away.”

He looked at Charlie in confusion. “So… why are you here?”

“Word got out quickly. The whole town’s talking about you guys. And your poor friend. I’m so sorry. But I… I had to see you. It’s not… ideal,” She looked vaguely toward the other boys. “But I figured I ought to anyway.”

She fought a smile vainly, looking off. “I think I care about you. Didn’t

realize until I found out I might never see you again, and it made me sick."

"Oh," Knox said anticlimactically.

"Oh? That's all you've got to say?" She laughed. "You are… infuriating."

It happened quickly. She reached through the bars to grab his shirt, pulling him to her, and their lips met through the gaps.

Todd looked to Charlie, who suddenly found the toes of his shoes very interesting. He wanted to say something but now wasn't the time. In fact, there hadn't been time, since the initial closet escapade, for Charlie to talk to him. Todd hated that, because while he could relax that he wasn't alone, Charlie had no such luxury, and at the moment, Charlie probably really would've liked to know someone saw him.

Chris moaned a little against Knox's mouth- who, mind you, was stiff as a board pressed against the bars and looked a little like a stunned deer- and Pitts and Meeks both huffed to hide their laughter. The whole thing was so immensely awkward, for all of them, and they were eager to have it end.

Finally, Chris pulled away, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, in a vaguely disgusted way, but winked. "Good luck, boys!"

For a moment, they all just sat there, staring at each other. They didn't even know what to do with that. But Knox turned around slowly and reached into his mouth, clearly looking for something, before pulling out a single bobby pin.

He held it out, staring at it in surprise.

"Fuck yeah! Good on you, Knoxious!" Charlie cried, scrambling to his feet. Knox passed it through the bars, and he took it, wiping the spit off on his shirt, then reaching around through the door to get it in the lock.

"No way you know how to pick locks," Pitts murmured, coming to the shared wall to watch.

Charlie stuck his tongue out to the side and bit it as he focused. It took just a minute, until the door clanged loudly and he pushed it open. Knox clapped.

“My last trick of the evening,” Charlie proclaimed. “You’re home free, Todd.”

“You guys aren’t coming?”

“We’ll get caught. And you’re the only one that needs to go to restart the loop.”

Todd nodded. “See you tomorrow.”

He took off through the precinct halls, past the other cells, and the poets yawped as he disappeared from view, which incited the other prisoners to cheer when he ran past until the whole place was celebrating Todd’s escape.

He half-smiled. They’d forget it in the morning.

Charlie held Todd’s hand when the gun went off.

It was still startling, and both of them, plus Pitts and Knox flinched when the sound erupted through the silent theater, even though they were all expecting it. The other members of the audience cried out in terror, ducking under their seats and grabbing their children.

The four boys, instead, got to their feet.

Meeks, in the back of the theater- where Tom Perry had been standing only moments before- twirled the hot gun, still smoking, around his finger. “Get Neil! Let’s go!”

Neil hadn’t been on stage, but now he was. He looked out into the dark in… shock, but not horror.

Meeks met his eyes, taking off his glasses- splattered with blood- and wiping them on the bottom of his shirt.

“Neil! We’re going!” Charlie yelled suddenly, and Neil floundered for just a moment, before jumping from the stage and running down the aisle to meet them.

“What’s…?! What’s happening?” He asked Todd frantically.

“We’ll explain later.”

Knox and Pitts wrenched open the doors, and the other four- Meeks,

Charlie, Todd, and Neil- burst through them and into the snow. The former two would stay behind; it was easier to hide four boys than six boys.

“You killed him,” Neil mumbled. “You killed him. You killed him! You *killed* him!”

“I know,” Todd answered consolingly. “I know it’s a lot. But we’ve got to go or we’ll miss the train.”

Neil didn’t even seem present in his own body. “You killed him.”

“Stephen!”

Meeks, leading the group, turned around at the edge of the sidewalk to face Pitts, stopping the others as well.

“Where are you going? So I can find you.”

“I can’t tell you. Plausible deniability.”

He nodded reluctantly. “Will I see you again?”

“Uh,” Meeks checked his watch, lying haltingly, “Yeah. Yeah, of course you will.”

“Take care of Knox,” Charlie begged.

“Good luck.”

Charlie tapped four times on the motel door in quick succession. A pause, and then two more longer taps.

Todd opened the door.

“Hey,” Charlie dumped the haul on the table- a collection of food, and a rolled-up newspaper- that Pitts had obtained and left at the drop spot. “They’re calling it ‘The Welton Boy Massacre,’ which is fucking stupid.”

“Doesn’t a massacre have to be multiple people? *Innocent* people?” Meeks said, retrieving a roll to shove in his mouth as he unfolded the newspaper.

“Clearly, they’re not going for accuracy,” He rolled his eyes. “Where’s

Neil?"

"He won't come out of the bathroom again," Todd muttered.

"Alright, I'll go get him." He knocked gently. "Neil, I've got food. Come on, man."

It took a minute for a reply, over the constant sound of rushing water, but it did come. "I'm not hungry."

"You said that yesterday too. You actually have to eat every day."

"...I'm fine, Charlie."

"Neil-"

"I said I'm fine."

He sighed and slowly returned to the table with the others. "Todd, you go talk some sense into him. He'll listen to you."

"I already tried."

"Well, try again. Go spin some of that sad boy charisma on him."

Todd shook his head, but Charlie had pulled an envelope from his pocket with the name *Stephen* written on it in Pitts' scrawled handwriting, and that would be a long conversation between them.

Todd rapped softly on the bathroom door. "Neil, it's me."

He didn't say anything for a long, long time, but eventually, the water shut off for the first time in days. Todd rested his forehead against the wood. "Neil…"

Another set of agonizing, infinite seconds, until finally, it unlocked audibly, deafening in the silence where the water had been. Another second, and the knob was turning under Todd's hand without him moving at all.

Neil cracked open the door.

"You look… bad," Todd whispered stupidly.

He really did. His greasy hair was matted to his forehead, extenuating the dark spots under his eyes and the green tinge to his face. He smiled sickly. "Something's wrong."

“Yeah…”

He opened the door further so Todd could slip inside with him, then returned to his place hunched over the sink, flipping the water on again and steeling himself against the porcelain.

“What is it?” Todd sounded less stable than he wanted to. Less sure. Less… dependable.

Neil stuttered a moment, before admitting, “I can’t get them clean.”

Todd swallowed thickly. “What?”

“My hands. I can’t… I can’t get them clean.”

Todd crossed over to stand beside him. “Jesus, Neil!”

Neil thrust his hands back under the lukewarm water, scrubbing anxiously against his knuckles. Already, the skin was red and chapped, and his cuticles peeled back miserably from his nails under the pressure.

Todd grabbed his wrists, yanking him backward as fast as he could. “You’ve, look, you’ve- how can you- what, your hands are *clean.”*

“No they’re not,” Neil stared at him, blinking restlessly. “Can’t you see it? There’s blood all over. I’ve, I’ve washed them and washed them, but it won’t come off.”

“There’s nothing there! You’ll scrub to the bone!”

Neil twitched a little, trying to pull from his grasp. “I’ve got to get ‘em clean. I have to wash them, Todd.”

“There’s nothing on your hands,” Todd begged, clutching him tighter. His stomach ached in desperation, and tears beaded at the corners of his eyes despite himself. “There’s nothing there. Your hands are clean.”

He insisted still. “They’re filthy.”

“They’re not! I’ll prove it. Charlie, come here!”

“No!” Neil wrenched away. “He can’t see. He’ll know! He’ll know what I’ve done. I’ve got to get them clean!”

“There’s nothing on your hands, Neil! CHARLIE!”

Charlie came running, and Neil went from jittery to agitated, thrashing wildly against Todd. “I’ve got to get ‘em clean! I have to wash ‘em!”

“Neil! Neil, calm down!” Charlie fought to restrain him, taking a few solid blows to the face before managing to get his arms around him and pulling him to his knees, and then to his lap, until Neil was confined against his chest. “You’re okay! Neil, you’re okay! It’s okay!” He panted desperately, smoothing back his sweaty hair and breathing heavily against his forehead. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Todd kneeled in front of him, grasping his raw, red hands and Neil returned it with a desperate hold to his soft, smooth fingers.

“It’s all my fault,” Neil whispered, before convulsing to bury his face against Charlie’s neck to sob pitifully, “It’s all my fault! I killed him! I KILLED HIM!”

Charlie clung to him, tipping his head back to lay against the bathroom wall in defeat. “It’s time,” He whispered.

Meeks stood in the doorway, Pitts’ letter crumpled in his hand, and he nodded solemnly.

Todd already had his shoes on. He squeezed Neil’s hands gently and murmured, “I’m gonna take care of it,” before beginning to pry himself away.

Neil whined miserably, trying to reach for him, but Charlie tightened his grasp to hold him back. “Go, just go. Make sure he gets there.”

Meeks reported that he would.

The Welton grounds were nearly unchanged from how they had been when they’d left, and the walk through the snow Todd knew like a childhood friend.

He’d started out on the dock, when the screams to “Put your hands up!” started, and the pounding of boots echoed behind him, but Meeks yelled, “Go, Todd! Run!”

Todd sprinted the final yards and dove into the water.

“Ready?”

Charlie agreed. He leaned toward Chris, who had the pleasure of joining them this time around, after proving she was down with the wicked a dozen tries before, and whispered, “You’re sure Ginny’s on board?”

She nodded. “Ginny’ll do anything to get on Chet’s nerves, and if it means being in cahoots with you lot, she’s more than happy. She’s a private school kid too; lying to adults is like the one thing you’re good at.”

Charlie smirked. “Damn straight.”

Once, when Todd was a little kid, his nanny had taken him to the circus. It was long enough ago that the only memories he had were cloudy and sort of nostalgic. He does remember, however, quite clearly, a man with a collection of bowls, a single shiny gold coin, quick hands, and a quicker mouth, assembled to form a trick to steal small children’s pocket money. He’d place the coin under one of the upturned bowls, and shuffle two or three other bowls in and out around each other, until the location of the coin had become too hard to follow, then demanded his poor spectators to disclose where it was. When they guessed wrong- they always did- he kept their nickels and they waddled away from the stand in disappointment at being bamboozled out of the same amount of money it took to buy a stick of cotton candy.

Neil was the coin. Todd was the conman, and he had to manage to scramble the proverbial bowls in record time without losing track himself.

Pitts and Meeks waited until the moment Tom set foot in the theater to excuse themselves. Pitts had declared he could very, *very* easily hotwire a car if he could get his hands on some good pliers. Meeks had pulled a pair from his pocket with the comment that “he wasn’t an animal.” That’s where they were now.

Charlie went next, waiting long enough to yawp when Neil came out for bows, then snuck around to the stage wings.

The remaining three- Chris, Knox, and Todd were out the moment the curtains closed, so Keating was trapped behind a crowd of people and couldn’t catch up.

Tom stormed from the back of the theater to the stage, interrogating a stagehand about the whereabouts of his son, but she simply shrugged. “He’s probably in his dressing room. I haven’t seen him since curtain

call."

"Where is that?"

She pointed vaguely, but had her attention pulled away by a few other crew members who needed help lifting a set piece.

Tom went backstage, weaving in and out of ecstatic teenagers celebrating their performance, getting steadily more annoyed as people continued to cut in front of him to get through the tight space.

Eventually, he happened across a blonde girl helping unzip a brunette's dress and startled in embarrassment.

"You're not supposed to be back here," Ginny Danbury said, clutching the loose dress to her chest.

"Yeah," Chris Noel agreed. "Are you looking for someone?"

"My son," Tom coughed awkwardly. "Neil Perry."

Both girls blinked absently.

"Who?"

"He, was, uh," He looked off toward a group of boys laughing, trying to focus on anything that wasn't Ginny's bare shoulders. "With the crown, and the sticks?"

"Who, Puck?" Ginny laughed incredulously. "I saw him go back that way," She waved behind her and looked at Chris suggestively. "He's probably back there with the Christensen girl."

Tom somehow looked even more red in the face, although it couldn't be said whether it was due to fury or humiliation, and quickly darted off the way she said.

Chris and Ginny high-fived.

It was darker, the farther you got from the stage, and there were teenagers in different states of undressing and exhaustion, and Tom tried to make it very clear, that he knew what he was looking for. Finally, against one of the brick walls, he made out the figure in all gray, with the silhouette of a berry crown, and pressed on with more determination.

He was, in fact, back with the Christensen girl, lips pressed to her

collarbone, and Tom thought for a moment he might actually kill his own child out of sheer shame.

“Neil!” He barked. “We’re going.”

He didn’t lift his head, and the girl giggled obnoxiously.

Tom charged toward him, taking hold of his shoulder and wrenching him backward.

“Neil, I swear, I will-” He cut off, eyes wide, staring at the boy in front of him.

“Hey, Mr. Perry,” Charlie Dalton declared with a shit-eating grin.

Neil, was, instead, in the backseat of his father’s car, with Knox and Todd, while Pitts was driving. Meeks was turned completely around in the passenger seat to talk to them.

“I’m sorry, I’m confused,” Neil said. “You want me to talk to my mom? About what?”

“About acting,” Todd explained. “She’ll help you stand up to your father, she’ll help you get… untrapped.”

“My *mother?”* He asked incredulously. “You stole my father’s car and abducted me so I could… *talk to my mother* ?”

“Yes,” Knox declared. “It makes sense if you have a lot of background information we don’t have time to give you.”

“Don’t we have, like, endless amounts of time, actually?” Pitts muttered, and Meeks whacked him lightly.

“Not this time around. Charlie can only keep him busy so long.”

“Charlie’s with my father? Oh God, no. They’ll kill each other.”

“That’s not your problem right now. You’ve got to make sure your father doesn’t kill *you* .”

The boys sat in the living room on Imogene Perry’s pink, floral couch, trying very hard not to touch anything that looked like it could break. Pitts had poked a tchotchke and nearly shattered it, and now they kept their hands clasped in their laps.

“It’s a good thing we *didn’t* bring Charlie,” Knox mumbled and all of them, Neil included from his armchair, snickered.

“Do you want tea, boys?”

They quickly declined, watching out the window for Tom to get back. They weren’t sure how much time they had at all.

“Mom, just sit down, we have to talk to you.”

She perched apprehensively on the settee directly across from the tightly packed teenagers. “What is it? Is something wrong?”

“Yes,” Todd said before he could stop himself. “Or, it will be.”

“Neil, what’s-”

“I want to act,” He blurted unceremoniously. “I don’t want to be a doctor or go to Harvard, or do any of it. I want to act.”

Meeks interjected, “He’s really good, too.”

Neil smiled gratefully but turned back to her. “I just… I need you on my side. I can’t… I…” He looked away miserably, groping for the words and meeting Todd’s sight for support. Todd didn’t know what to say any better than he did. Neil chewed his bottom lip. “I can’t stand up to him myself.”

Imogene looked, for just a second, like she might agree. Like she could see the way Neil was hurting, like she could find the strength in her to defend him if he needed it. But at the next moment, Tom’s keys were in the door and whatever thought she’d had for a moment vanished.

“Your father knows what’s best for you, Neil,” She said softly.

Neil’s shoulders slumped. He nodded passively, and wouldn’t look at his friends. He wasn’t angry, just… disappointed. “It’s not her fault,” he murmured.

The poets stood up at the same moment.

“See you later, Neil,” They muttered, shuffling toward the door.

“Where are you going?” He whispered.

Meeks mumbled, “We’ve got to get Todd to the dock.”

Todd was sitting on Charlie's bed in nothing but a sweater and his underwear.

This was… unideal. For one thing, it was freezing, even with the congregating body heat of the five boys in the tight space, and also, if someone walked in, he wasn't exactly sure how he was going to explain it.

Pitts rubbed his face exhaustedly. "Okay, wait, so we tried the thing with the pipes?"

Knox, from the foot of Charlie's bed, manhandled Todd's leg to read the felt pen scribbled on his calf. "Yeah, looks like we flooded it somewhere in the twenties."

"Why didn't that work?"

Todd flopped back on the pillows. " *Don't* ask about the flood loop. That was a nightmare."

Meeks pulled Todd's thigh tight and squinted. "What does Lady Macbeth mean?"

"That's from the time you killed Tom."

He cocked an eyebrow. "That was a no?"

"Meeks killed somebody?!" Knox cried.

"I don't know why you're surprised by that. Actually, I'm a little offended that you are." He rocked back off his haunches and peered over the list he'd made again.

Charlie smacked his head against the wall. "What if we like, booby trap the theater?"

Todd sucked in a breath, looking over the writing. In the space just above his left knee, he read aloud, "Booby-trapped theater- fail."

"Ugh, this is so hard."

"That's what she said," Meeks and Pitts mumbled at the same time, then high-fived without even looking up.

"Okay, hear me out," Knox straightened from where he'd slumped

against the wall. “What if we just tell Neil not to kill himself?”

“Yeah, we had an intervention around 35 or 36,” Todd muttered boredly. “He doesn’t kill himself tonight, but his father sends him to military school, and he ends up dead before his birthday.”

“Right.”

They sat in silence for a minute, the only sound scratching through being Meeks’ pen on his paper. Finally, they were all startled at once by the door being pushed open.

“There you guys are! I’ve been looking all over for you,” Neil laughed, sticking his head through the crack. “What are you doing?”

Charlie sort of pushed him by the chest back into the hall. “Planning you a surprise party. Don’t ruin it.” He closed the door on him and returned to his spot by the wardrobe.

“Charlie!” The others chorused exasperatedly.

“What?! He won’t remember in the morning!”

They mumbled their agreement and returned to thinking. Pitts tore off the corner of his paper and wadded it up, flicking it to hit Knox in the face, who flipped him off.

“This would be so much easier if it was me in the Meatloop,” Charlie mumbled.

Meeks snorted. “As if. You would rip a hole in spacetime. Why do you think Todd’s the one stuck? Because he can be trusted with the limitless bounds of time conundrum. He’s responsible.”

“First of all, fuck you. Second of all, I could be responsible! I wouldn’t rip a hole in space *or* time! In fact, I’d be more mature than all of you combined.”

“Trust me,” Todd rolled on his side. “If I could trade places with you, I would.”

“That’s…” Knox started, then stopped suddenly. He looked around at the others like something revolutionary had been said and they all were meant to have recognized it. “That’s exactly it. That’s the whole point.”

“Share with the class?” Meeks said.

“We’re looking at this all wrong!” Knox got to his feet with the vigor in what he was saying. “That’s why it’s not working! We have the answer in front of us and we’ve just been ignoring it!”

“Okay, okay, get to the point.” Pitts motioned impatiently.

In answer, Knox just pointed to Todd.

No one said anything, but everyone side-eyed each other to see if they thought he was acting as insane as he thought he was.

“No, guys, think about it! We’ve been looking at it like we don’t know what the deciding factor is. That there’s some moment, or event, that we have to prevent or change. But it was never that complicated. We know exactly what the most important piece is.”

“Would you like to tell us?”

“It’s obvious! All of us, except Charlie and his disregard for the universe-”

Charlie threw his hands up in disbelief.

“-Literally, any one of us could be stuck in the loop. It could be up to any of us to be the deciding factor in what happens tonight. We’re all friends with Neil, we’re all there tonight, there’s literally nothing different about any of us, except for one thing: one of us is in the loop, and no one else is. Because the universe *knows,* and has been trying to tell us THE ENTIRE TIME that the most important thing is…” He turned around with a proud smile. “ *Todd.”*

The group fell into stunned silence, until finally, Meeks hummed. “That… actually makes sense.”

He stood up to get eye level with Knox before continuing, “Which means, there’s something about Todd, something inherent, and- and, fundamentally different, that we can use to break the Meatloop.”

“Exactly!” Knox yawped excitedly.

Charlie lit up, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him. “You’re right! Knox, you’re brilliant!”

“That’s…” Todd tried to speak over their excited cheering, feeling like a wet blanket. “That’s not possible. If it was just about me, then I should’ve been able to figure it out months ago, when it was just me.”

“No, no, not necessarily.” Meeks climbed onto the bed. “Because you were still trying to influence outside events. The answer is just *you.* I don’t know how, yet, but I’m sure of it.”

“Okay, new list,” Pitts ripped off a fresh page of scratch paper and passed it, with the pen since abandoned on the floor, to Meeks. “What makes Todd special?”

They all began talking at once, listing off the silliest things too fast for Meeks to scribe them all, until Knox picked up a pen and started from the bottom of the page.

Todd knew it should have been endearing. Flattering, even, that they could manage to say so many sweet things about him, as trivial as they seemed. He couldn’t find it in him to be warmed by it, however, because the list was pointless. He knew exactly what adjective they were looking for, burned on the tip of his tongue, but he didn’t say it.

He probably never would say it. He’d managed it once, in the closet with Charlie, where no one could hear him and no outside force could use it against him, but this was different. This was admitting it was real, and telling his closest friends, who were probably not as… peculiar as Charlie, and might hate him forever.

I’m gay.

“Come on, Todd,” Charlie prompted. “What do you like about yourself?”

The question, as Charlie had a habit of doing lately, set him catatonic, as he sat there staring at the ugly beige comforter. Because for not a single moment, could he come up with an answer.

Everyone waited silently, expectantly, and Todd swallowed thickly, as the second dragged on too long. Knox frowned and tipped his head forward to urge him on, but nothing would come from Todd’s dry mouth.

“He’s humble, too,” Pitts joked uncomfortably, and Knox and Meeks laughed, adding it to the list.

Charlie’s expression didn’t change. He just looked at Todd like he was seeing something he’d never noticed before.

Todd got up to put his pants back on. He met Charlie’s burning gaze and mumbled, “I need to talk to you.”

“You, uh, come here often?” Charlie chuckled softly.

Todd didn’t lift his head from his knees. He didn’t actually have a good explanation for why he’d brought Charlie back to the closet. It felt safe, and sheltered, and made confessions like the one he needed to tell seem less explosive.

“Okay, you’re kind of freaking me out. What did you need to tell me?”

Todd sucked in a ragged breath. He murmured feebly. *“I’m in love with Neil.”*

Charlie nodded. “I know. What did you bring me here to talk about?”

Todd froze. He had been expecting… something. But not… *that.* He lifted his head slowly. Charlie was still just staring at him imploringly, waiting for the pin to drop. Todd almost wanted to laugh. “No, that’s… that’s it. I’m in love with Neil.”

“Oh!” Charlie’s eyes got wide and his voice went unnaturally high. “Oh! Wow! That’s *huge* news! I’m shocked! I’m just…” He shook his head emphatically. “ *SO surprised.”*

And at that, Todd did laugh. He buried his face back in his lap and laughed until he couldn’t breathe. “Don’t follow Neil to the stage anytime soon.”

“Come on, I was trying *very* hard to not sound like an absolute dick. Really thought I could save my ass on that one.”

“You really already knew?”

“I mean, I wondered. It’s… kind of obvious. Sorry, man.”

“Do you think they know?” He motioned vaguely back toward Charlie’s room.

He shrugged and exhaled through pursed lips. “I mean, who knows?”

“Stop lying, please, it’s like physically hurting me.”

He dropped his shoulders. “Yeah, they definitely know. If *I* figured it out, then, there’s like exactly zero chance Meeks hasn’t. And I’m pretty sure him and Pitts share a brain most days.”

Todd nodded dejectedly. He rubbed a smudge from the toe of his shoe. “Do you… do you think if I… confirm it… they won’t want to talk to me anymore?”

Charlie snorted a laugh. “Not even a little. Do you *want* me to tell you what I saw them doing in the library? I would, but I think it would explode your pure little brain. And Knox, man, he likes the idea of love in any shape or form. Doesn’t matter to him. And…” He shrugged. “I’ve been known to… dabble. I’m an expert on romance- you don’t think that’s girl-exclusive, right?”

Todd laughed softly into his arms. It felt good to have the truth out again.

“I’ve told you that before, haven’t I?”

Todd nodded. “Waxed poetic about Bing Crosby.”

“I stand by that.”

And suddenly, Todd’s Big Secret didn’t feel so unforgivable. So unwelcome. Almost like it didn’t need to be expressed in the depths of a coat closet in the hall.

“Should we go back? Sounds like we’ve got a new plan to cook up.”

Todd wanted to say yes, wanted to go back and cooperate, but the nervousness still hadn’t settled in his stomach. There was another thought, one that had been festering in the back of his mind that he refused to unravel and panic over until this exact moment. *That’s* what he was really upset about; he was just hiding behind the idea that he didn’t want to tell his friends, to ignore this stronger, more potent thought.

“Alright, lay it on me.”

“What?”

“Telling them isn’t what’s got you shaking like that. Tell me what it really is.”

He didn’t answer immediately. There were a lot of half-thought sentences that didn’t quite fit together, and other things about Jeffery that didn’t fit at all, but had somehow been lumped into his thought hairball, and it took a moment for him to start untangling it all. Eventually, he started with a sigh, “I think I’ve been in love with Neil

for a long time."

"You met him in August, but I appreciate your commitment."

"Yeah, but, it's been December for, like, a year. It's longer than just August. I've lived a whole life today alone, and Neil's been there the whole time."

"Touche."

"And, I think, at least since that day at the hotel- which you don't remember, so whatever- but… probably even before that… maybe the bridge… maybe before the loop at all, I've known it deep inside of me. That he was different to me. And I've just been… putting it off. Pretending I didn't understand the thought so it was easier for me to ignore."

Charlie hummed thoughtfully.

"Because…" He swallowed. "Because I don't *want* to be in love with him. And that sounds horrible, trust me, I know. But I'm just…" And for the first time, in his whole life, Todd realized the root of the problem. "I'm just so afraid of disappointing him."

The pair sat in silence to think that over.

"I've never been good enough. My father used to tell me I was worth $5.98. I've been disappointing my parents, my grandparents, my teachers, my coaches, my sisters, Jeffery… and I've just dealt with it." He sniffed some of the emotion from his nose and wiped it on the back of his sleeve. "But disappointing Neil would be different. Because I *want* him, and, and because he *deserves* to have someone who is good enough. The only thing this loop has proved is that I'm not. That it's taken me *this* long to figure out how to save him. And we're going to go back, into that room, and they're going to convince me that I, I have to tell him how I feel, and that's what will fix everything. But, Charlie, I'm so scared. Because what if it doesn't? Because then, I will have to know, without a doubt, that I am not good enough, and that I've disappointed him too." He had to stop to let the tears leave his voice, but they persisted nonetheless. "I won't be able to stand it." He smiled sadly, shrugging with forced nonchalance. "If I never tell him, I never have to face the reality."

Charlie rocked from where he sat, mirroring Todd's curled position with his knees to his chest. He didn't make a sound, didn't even breathe audibly, and Todd wiped his face nervously. "Come on, say

something."

Charlie clicked his tongue, before answering levelly, "I think it's bullshit."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your logic is bullshit. Like, all of it."

"I don't-"

He moved to face Todd, crossing his legs so he could lean forward as he talked. "Okay, so you think being stuck in the loop forever means you're… worthless, or whatever. Because you weren't perfectly clever the first time around. But, if anything, the fact that you *have* been in the loop this long, and you're still getting up and convincing us, and *trying* proves the exact opposite. You've suffered a million times over, and I'm sure you've wanted to give up, but you didn't. Because you're going to the ends of time, and your wits, just to *try* to be good enough. Man, Meeks is right. I'm so fucking glad it's you and not me. I would be in it twice as long as you and get half as far, and I'd give up when it got too overwhelming. You're the only one that could do this, because you're the only one that *wants, needs* to be enough for Neil."

Todd pushed his hair out of his face.

"And, about telling him," Charlie continued. "That whole thing is fucking stupid. I mean, I see what you mean, that it's gonna hurt like a bitch, if for some reason it's not the answer. Which I don't think is true. But regardless, you're not protecting yourself from something by keeping everything bottled up so he'll never know. If you tell him how you feel, there's a fifty percent chance he'll reciprocate and you two ride off into the sunset together, and fifty percent that he breaks your heart and you'll never know if you could've had something great. Sure. But if you never give yourself, or him, the opportunity to have something, if you never even tell him there's feelings there, then there's a one-hundred percent chance that you'll never know. Which is considerably worse odds. I think. Meeks did all my statistics homework sophomore year." Charlie took a deep breath, trying to catch up on his words flying a mile a minute. "Wouldn't it be better to just know, instead of always wondering what would have happened if you told him? Carpe diem, right?"

Todd was… at a loss. Because he had thought his reasoning was completely waterproof, unmovable, and resolute, but Charlie made so much sense. He had so much of a point, it had inflated a long-dead

sensation in Todd, transitioning from a pit in his stomach to butterflies.

He had hope.

“But what do I know?” Charlie finished spectacularly.

“I thought you were a romance expert,” Todd mumbled.

“Well…! Actually, you got me there.”

Todd’s legs were starting to hurt from sitting so compactly for so long. He unfolded, crossing his legs like Charlie’s so their knees rested against each other. They thought about it, about the fact that the worst-case scenario was not that Neil didn’t want Todd enough to stay alive. It was that they could go about their lives in love with each other, and have the whole thing wasted because neither of them was brave enough to say anything.

Finally, Todd murmured, “Charlie?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m only going to say this once, so you better really savor it.”

He leaned in, so Todd could whisper right in his ear. “ *I think you’re right.”*

Charlie closed his eyes and leaned back ecstatically. He yawped quietly, grinning so wide Todd thought it might split his face in half.

“We’re a good pair, Todd. What with my endless good looks and charming humor, and your subtle bitchiness and stomach problems, we could rule the world.”

“Let’s focus on the task at hand before we go about other ambitions, please.”

Charlie nodded adamantly. “You’re right, of course! DOWN WITH THE MEATLOOP!”

The Ecstacy Is So Short But The Forgetting Is So Long

Chapter Notes

You guys! The end is nearly upon us!
And FINALLY I can give you some good, sweet, pure anderperry.
You're welcome

The support for this fic has just been overwhelming. It was sort of a crack idea that me and all my roommates come up with because of one deleted scene but it's completely changed me as a person and I can't believe I'm about to be done with it forever! I would like to thank everyone for their kind words, detailed comments, and devotion to Meatloop Monday/Thursday. I consider you all my friends and I would love it if you wanted to come follow me over on Tumblr at theshippirate22!

I hope to start another fic soon where Charlie accidentally becomes a teen dad and chaos ensues because like. Imagine Charlie trying to keep a human child alive- so if you have any interest in that or any ideas regarding it PLEASE let me know! I'm going to write it regardless, but I'd love to share it with you too

Sad to say it for the last time, but Happy Meatloop Thursday friends! Kisses to you all! <3

“We’ve cracked the case, fellas,” Charlie announced, flinging open the door to his room with little regard for anything. “Time for a new plan.”

Knox quickly gathered up the papers they had spread across the bed, seconds before Charlie threw himself down haphazardly, the ancient bedframe groaning miserably. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and rolled it between his fingers. “Take it away, Todd.”

Todd closed the door softly behind him but didn’t come any further into the room than the immediate doorway. He fidgeted with his hands, uncomfortably, looking anywhere but directly at the poets, and tried to come up with the words.

“It’s alright,” Charlie mumbled consolingly, cigarette between his lips. He flicked his lighter a few times until it caught and drew in a long breath, before passing it to Knox.

Todd watched Knox cough out the smoke and swallowed his nerves. "I, I know why it's me." He nodded to no one but himself. "It's because I'm in love with him."

" *Fuck!"* Pitts cried.

Every ounce of blood drained out of Todd's face in panic. He wondered if he wished hard enough, the ground would open up and swallow him whole. This was stupid, *so stupid.* Why in the world would he listen to Charlie? Charlie was an idiot who didn't care about consequences or-

Meeks was laughing. He threw his head back and howled with laughter, holding his hand out to Pitts, who dug into his pocket to pull out some cash. He dropped it disgustedly in Meeks' hand and rolled his eyes. "Okay! You were right! I get it!"

"I owe you lunch, Todd," Meeks grinned, waving the dollars mischievously. "This is excellent."

Todd exhaled audibly, shoulders relaxing from where they'd tensed nearly to his chin, and he scrubbed his face in relief. Charlie met his eye with a smirk and winked.

"God," Knox murmured. "This must've been horrible for you. Watching him die over and over again and not being able to stop it?"

Todd nodded.

"We're not gonna let it happen again." He sorted through the stack of paper in his lap until he found one that was relatively empty. "Okay, what are we doing, folks?"

"You have to tell him!" Pitts said, scrambling off Cameron's bed to sit by Meeks. "That must be the nexus event!"

Todd nodded some more. He was really tired of catching everyone up all the time.

"So, what are we waiting for? We've got to go get Neil! Where is he normally?"

"Uhh, he, uh," Todd squinted and waved his hands to try and remember faster. "Hager pulls him from Spencer's at three to get ready, and then he usually comes to hang out with us for a while, and then they leave around 4:15, so he can be at the theater by 4:30."

“What time is it?”

Knox pulled back his sleeve. “It’s, uh, 3:46.”

“Oh! Oh, we have plenty of time!” Meeks got up, dragging Pitts with him. “Let’s go!”

Charlie was already crossing over to wrench open the door and the others herded Todd out into the hall.

Knox darted past to open the door to Todd and Neil’s room, but it was empty, and they noticed immediately.

“Okay, Pitts check Keating’s; Knox, the showers; Meeks, kitchens,” Charlie delegated quickly. “Bring him back here. Todd, you stay here in case he comes back by himself.”

Todd nodded anxiously. His stomach crawled with anticipation in a way that he couldn’t quite quell, not with his typical nausea but some other anxiety. He ducked into the room, as the boys’ dress shoes pounded through the hall with their runs.

He noticed then, the half-sheet of paper on Neil’s desk, and when the deja vu rocked him, he suddenly felt very much like vomiting. “Charlie!” He called before he dared to pick it up.

Charlie came running back, skidding to a stop next to him. “What is it?”

Dear Todd,

I meant to see you before I left, but it seems like you guys are up to something and if Charlie is to be believed, I didn’t want to ruin the surprise! I left early with Hager to get some extra practice in with Ginny before dress rehearsal.

See you tonight, Neil

Todd’s heart hammered in his chest, but his cold sweat started to evaporate. “He’s not here,” He gasped.

“Where is he?” Charlie asked, swiping the note and reading through it quickly. “Oh, damn it! It’s okay! We can make it work! Let me get the guys; we’ll get you there.”

He thrust the note back at Todd, who shoved it in his pocket and shot off in the direction the others had gone.

Todd pulled Knox from the bathroom by the collar and they sprinted downstairs, nearly crashing into Charlie and Meeks coming from the other direction, directly outside Keating's room as Pitts emerged.

"He's not here."

"He's already at the theater," Todd panted. "He left early."

"Regroup, guys, we've got to get him there," Charlie managed, hunched over with his hands on his knees to catch his breath. "We won't have time after the show because Tom will already be there to take him, so it's gotta be before."

"Do we have time to walk?"

They checked their watches. It was already nearly four o'clock, and it would take at least twenty minutes through the snow.

"Okay, okay. Pitts, you hotwired a car a few times ago. Could you do that again?" Todd asked desperately.

He shook his head miserably. "Not enough time."

"Who has keys?" Charlie asked. "How can we get our hands on one of the Welton cars?"

Meeks motioned frantically. "Hager has keys. He just dropped Neil off. He's probably still got 'em."

"Got it!" Charlie shot off toward the doors without any other explanation.

The poets floundered between each other for a moment, then decided all at once to chase after him. They managed to catch up at the exact second that Hager came around a corner, and Charlie properly body-slammed him with the force of his jog.

"Dalton!" Hager cried, and the poets watched in mesmerization as the keys tumbled from his hand and clattered against the tile floor.

Effortlessly, Charlie kicked them before Hager could notice, sliding under the floor-length curtains and disappearing from view. "Sorry! So sorry, Dr. Hager. Totally my bad."

Hager muttered something about demerits, shaking his head angrily, as he continued walking.

The other poets waited a moment for him to pass them, nodding politely and tensely in recognition, and go on down the hall, before joining Charlie, who had retrieved the keys and held them up like a cat who was particularly proud of the mouse it had caught.

They pushed through the doors and into the snow, running to the row of Welton-issued cars. They were in view of McCallister's window, and McCallister was a snitch, so they needed to get in and out as quickly as they could without someone noticing.

Pitts drove because he was the only one who knew how to, and everyone talked over each other to come up with a solid plan.

Somehow, Todd had ended up in the middle of the backseat, with Charlie and Meeks arguing over him about who was going to do what and when, until Knox whipped around and started assigning things.

Pitts pulled into the lot outside Henley Hall, and Charlie was already climbing out before they'd even fully stopped. Todd tumbled after him, pulse pounding, although he couldn't tell if it was from adrenaline or nerves.

It was nearly nostalgic, creeping backstage before the show, when everyone was abuzz with the excitement of the upcoming show. He swerved in and out of groups and around props being transported here and there, looking for Neil's familiar figure.

He didn't find it, but he did see Ginny Danbury and made his way toward her. "Have you seen Neil?"

"Oh," She looked around, doing a cursory glance over the heads of everyone around, but to no avail. "I think he said he was going to get dressed. You could check back by the dressing rooms."

"Right, thanks," He acknowledged, already heading in that direction. He'd lost the others a while back, but they could fend for themselves. He had more pressing things on hand, like the feeling of his heart in his throat, threatening to spill from his mouth at any moment.

Along the west wall, there was a row of dressing rooms- although they weren't so much dressing rooms as a closet with a curtain instead of a door for a feigned sense of privacy, and Todd raced over. "Neil!" He hissed. "Neil!"

Neil pulled back the curtain and looked out. "Todd!" His eyes got wide in sudden panic and he looked around to scope out if they'd

been caught. “Todd?! What are you doing here? How did you even get in?”

“Oh, please,” He murmured, as Neil grabbed him by the collar and yanked him inside the dressing room. “If Chris can get into Welton, I can get into Henley.”

“Chris went to Welton?”

“Well,” He shook his head. “Not yet. Doesn’t matter. Charlie’s with me as a diversion.”

Neil’s complexion paled, and he whisper-yelled, “Charlie is *here?!* Loose and unsupervised at Henley? Are you *crazy?!”*

“Knox is with him!”

“Ah, yes, our friend who is famously known for making good choices around women. Surely nothing will go wrong!”

“I know, I know,” Todd laughed nervously. “We were kind of in a hurry. It wasn’t a great plan, but it is what it is. I just needed to talk to you.”

“What’s going on?”

He shook his head. “Don’t, don’t say anything until I’m done, because if you start talking, I’ll stop talking and I won’t say everything I need to say. Okay?”

Neil cocked an eyebrow in confusion. “What’s wrong-”

“Just say yes, you won’t talk.” Todd grabbed his arms and shook him a little to get across how urgent this really was

“Okay! Okay, yeah, sure, I won’t talk.”

“Okay.” He let go, smoothing Neil’s sleeve where he’d bunched it, and took a deep breath, before everything came tumbling out all at once. “Okay, listen. I know this is insane but I just had to say something, and I let Charlie convince me it was a good idea, which is never good, but I think he’s actually right this time, because I *did* do my statistics homework, but whatever, it doesn’t matter, because the truth of the matter is, you’re my best friend. You’re my best friend, and I, God, I really…” He shook his head. “Hold on, let me start over.”

Neil half-smiled, staring up at him eagerly.

“You know, I’m just kind of a disappointment. But it’s okay! That’s not the point. The point is, I’ve been a disappointment to everyone around me for so long that I started to be disappointed in myself. So I stopped letting myself care about things. You know how it is; when you’re always disappointed, you just… give up, so you can spare yourself from it. You don’t get let down if you don’t care about what happens. I guess I had been that way for so long, I forgot how wonderful it was to want something, to love something, to, to care! But… but then there was you, and… and I've just been so unhappy my *whole life.* I thought maybe something was wrong with me, but… I think I was just waiting around for you. You stir me up, Neil.”

He looked up at the ceiling, at the single, bare lightbulb cascading over them. “The problem, though, with being stirred up is that you finally have something to lose. And I know after tonight your father’s going to take you away, and you’ll probably become important and famous, and you won’t even think of me, and it’s going to be the worst thing that’s ever happened to me. And still, I hope tonight is everything you dreamed of. I hope it’s perfect. Because then you’ll know it was worth all the trouble, and I will be *so happy for you.* But I have to say it, I have to tell you. Because I can’t spend forever *wondering* what might have happened if for once in my life, I was brave enough to say something.”

He swallowed forcefully again, refusing to meet Neil’s gaze, so desperately *afraid* of what he might see. Horrified that he would be angry, or disgusted, or any other awful thing that would make Todd look like an idiot, a creep.

Neil’s hand lifted slowly into his peripheral vision, and stupidly, Todd’s first thought was *Oh, God, he’s going to hit me,* until he met so, so gently with the side of Todd’s face, carefully angling it down to face him, so he had no choice but to look at him.

“Tell me what, Todd?” Neil whispered.

Their faces were closer than Todd thought they were, and now he was barely inches from Neil, nearly knocking the tip of his nose against his, and the proximity- added to the warmth of Neil’s hand on his cheek- made his brain stop working fully. He bit his lip and tried to remember what he was meant to be saying.

Oh, that’s right.

“I *really* like you,” Todd murmured. “Like, not like a friend. Like, I

might be in love with you."

Neil stared like he hadn't heard him right. Like he'd hallucinated it. He just stood there, barely far enough from Todd to seem platonic.

"You can talk now." Todd choked.

But he didn't. Instead, the perfect secret smile, the one he only ever offered Todd, shifted onto his face, and his eyes flashed something too ecstatic to be described.

"Say it again."

"I… I'm in love with you."

Neil surged up on his toes, crashing his lips against Todd's, and Todd, in surprise, went completely stiff. But Neil's hands held the sides of his face so softly, so kindly, and he grinned into the kiss, against Todd, before pulling away slowly, eyes still closed and lips parted as he savored the feeling.

The wound in Todd, that aching, endless pit of want changed. It went from hurting, from making his chest burn with something he couldn't explain and couldn't remedy to something deeper and pleasant. Hunger pains to ferocity. Because the desire knew what it wanted, and he was right there, still pressed against him. The thing it longed for so distressingly could be had.

Todd ducked, ready this time, to meet him in the kiss. It wasn't great- Todd had never kissed anyone, and he was pretty sure Neil hadn't really either, unless they were counting the peck from Ginny Danbury as a freshman that Charlie had mentioned- and it was clumsy and awkward, but he didn't even care. It was so wonderful to stop feeling ill, to finally satisfy the pining that had been there so long he couldn't remember what it felt like before.

His arms hung uselessly at his sides, but when Neil's grip slid around his neck to pull him closer, he remembered he had them and they worked, and they landed naturally on his sides, steeling them against each other.

"Neil! We're starting in two minutes! Let's go!"

The boys startled apart, gasping for breath. "Okay!" Neil called, voice hoarse and cracking. "I'll be out in a minute!"

Footsteps receded away and they caught each other's eyes in the dark, which only forced them to erupt into quiet- for lack of a better word- giggles.

"I'm so relieved," Neil whispered. "I thought I was going to ruin everything. I was, Jesus, Todd, I *am*… Well, I mean, I might be in love with you too."

"Really?" Todd said like he couldn't believe it.

He nodded emphatically. "Really."

They laughed again, breathless and overjoyed, and it was the most wonderful thing Todd had ever felt.

"Neil!"

"I'm coming!" He yelled in response, not bothering to hide his annoyance. He adjusted his costume, and reached for his crown, then for the curtain. "I'll talk to you after, okay? I'll see you then, and we can… we'll talk about *this."*

"Okay," Todd agreed.

He pulled back the curtain, and started to step out, then on second thought, turned back around to grab Todd's collar and pull him in for another rushed, hungry kiss, before pushing him back upright and grinning. "Wish me luck!"

"You don't need it," Todd mumbled dazedly.

Neil shot off through the dark to get on stage, and Todd stood exactly in the spot where he left him, frozen in place. He reached up absently, to touch his lip, the same warm spot where Neil's hot, sweet mouth had been only seconds before. It was surreal.

He wasn't sure how long he was there until finally Knox and Charlie came around. They both talked faster than he could understand, still slightly stupefied, asking a million questions at once.

"Come on, SAY SOMETHING!" Charlie cried finally.

Todd blinked. "He likes me."

"What?"

He burst into a grin. "He likes me. He *likes* me. He likes *me!"*

Knox yawped, grabbing Todd and jumping excitedly, until Charlie joined in too, and the three of them were screaming and cheering and celebrating.

“He kissed me!” Todd said dreamily, stumbling backward to lean against the wall for support.

Charlie beamed. “Good on you, Todd!”

Todd couldn’t wipe the dopey smile off his face for the rest of the night.

The poets managed to get back to the car and then back to Welton before anyone noticed- Meeks left Hager’s keys on the floor near his desk, so he wouldn’t realize they’d been gone at all- and they piled into the dining hall for dinner.

“So, how long until we know if it worked?” Pitts asked, flicking his peas off his spoon at Meeks.

“That’s a good question,” Todd shrugged. “I’ll know after the performance if it worked or not. I know what it looks like when it hasn’t.”

“What, are there like, signs?” Knox asked through his mashed potatoes.

“No, I just…” Todd swirled his fork in his gravy, looking determinedly at the plate and trying to keep the blush from his face. “I just know Neil. I know how he is…”

The poets glanced between each other, all trying to keep a straight face, and not mention his *very obvious* flush, but Meeks blew it when he made eye contact with Charlie and they all exploded into laughter, chorusing antagonizing *“OOOOOOOOH”s* and wiggling their eyebrows suggestively.

Todd was too elated to be embarrassed, even if the pink spread from up to the tips of his ears.

Puck was looking for Todd.

Neil acted for the whole theater, of course, but it was different for

Todd, who had seen it a million times and knew exactly where Neil looked and when, and knew that Neil was being deliberate. For him. *For him.* For *him.*

Todd had never forgotten it, and the thought had happened upon him so many times, but it came to him again in the dark anyway.

You're so beautiful.

Neil must've felt it, the way he erupted on stage.

By bows, the poets were convinced they had done it. Of course, Todd had been the answer. It made perfect sense. They should've thought of it sooner; it should've been as clear as the sky on cloudless winter mornings.

Even when they passed Tom, stone-faced in the back row, the excitement couldn't be killed. *Good game, old man.* Todd thought. *I've never been so pleased to beat someone in my whole life.*

The poets waited on the curb like they had the first few loops, for Neil to come out. He was still behind Tom- it always happened like that unless something wild managed to change it- and the boys peered around each other to try and get a glimpse of him first.

But when he finally came into sight, Todd felt a familiar disappointment stir inside him.

Neil had the look, the beaten dog look, the obedient son, the sacrificial lamb. He met Todd's eye of his own volition, mustering a sad half-smile. *I'm sorry,* He mouthed miserably.

Todd was stunned. He could barely form a thought, other than *PLEASE, NOT AGAIN, NOT AGAIN,* screaming over and over again in his mind. It was happening again, he had failed *again,* he was going to have to watch him die *again.*

Of course Charlie was wrong. Of course they were all wrong. There was nothing special about Todd. Nothing remarkable enough to save Neil from what seemed to be his fate. It was just stupid, worthless, five-dollar Todd.

"I don't like that face," Knox wavered, appearing before Todd.

It startled him, although it shouldn't have, and he got enough clearance to look toward the car, toward Neil in the passenger seat

refusing to make eye contact. He'd been here before. He knew this story. He knew how it ended. It was always the same. Rereading it doesn't change the ending. It never has. Never will.

"No," Todd whispered brokenly.

The car disappeared into the night, Neil inside, and Todd laughed absurdly. It was like a bad dream in which everything was too real and not real at all. He stumbled out into the middle of the parking lot as it began to snow, and stared up at the white flakes falling from the infinite darkness stretched across the sky. There were no stars, just endless black and the holy wet tears.

He looked at his friends and smiled morbidly. "It's so beautiful."

Charlie tried to return his smile, but it sat crooked and disproportionate on his face.

Todd's stomach lurched, forcing a gag from his mouth. He caught it, trying to compose himself, but it came again, stronger this time, forcing him to his knees. The vomit came up torturously, acid burning his throat and out his swollen lips, and irrationally, he panicked that he was losing the taste of Neil, that the last bit of his spit that had made it into Todd's mouth, the last piece of him, the tangible evidence of their precious kiss, was in his sick on the asphalt, and it was horrible, it was horrible.

Charlie met him with a fistful of clean snow to the mouth and Todd leaned into it. He was too tired to fight it.

Knox was eating cold meatballs on Todd's floor.

Meeks and Pitts had gone to bed almost immediately. Todd didn't blame them; they weren't celebrating anymore.

He'd gotten home and perched on the edge of his bed, shaking uncontrollably, still in his coat and his shoes, waiting for something remarkable to happen. Charlie had come in after his shower, to find him just like that, frozen in time.

"Let's restart it," He begged. *"I'll get you to the dock. We'll try again. We'll get it next time."*

Todd shook his head. *"I can't."*

So Charlie had helped take off his coat and his shoes and wrapped a blanket around his shoulders to help with the trembling, and sat next to him, shoulder to shoulder, until it became too much and he couldn't help but put his arms around him.

Todd didn't cry this time, just buried his face in the warmth of Charlie's shoulder, and tried to disappear in his arms.

Now, Charlie was sitting cross-legged on the bed, back against the wall, with Todd's head in his lap. They'd sort of melted that way, and neither of them were in any hurry to move.

Knox had come up from the kitchen with the meatballs, and just the smell of them almost sent Todd retching again, but he was just *so tired.*

"We should get to sleep," Knox mumbled finally. "We'll figure out what to do in the morning when we've had time to think it over."

Charlie nodded emotionlessly. "Are you sure you don't want to go to the dock?"

Todd sat up slowly, whispering hoarsely, "Not yet. I… I can't go yet. I almost had him this time, I can't… I can't just leave it behind."

He half-smiled sympathetically. "Do you want me to stay in here with you?"

Todd looked at his hands. "I just… I wanna be alone."

"Okay," He looked around hesitantly. "If you… need anything… come get me."

Todd agreed.

He waited until both Knox and Charlie had gone to finally change into his pajamas, burying himself as deeply as he could in bed and trying to feel anything but the crushing weight of the longing creeping back in him.

I Love None Better Than You

Chapter Notes

> So here we are!! Our last chapter! Sorry about the cliff-hanger from last time but thank you for trusting the process and hopefully your sacrifice will pay off now!
> Kisses besties!!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You don't understand, Neil," Tom continued. "You have opportunities that I never even dreamt of! And I'm not going to let you waste them!"

"I've got to tell you what *I* feel!" Neil sobbed, leaping to his feet.

Imogene tried to get a word in, something she could offer her clearly distraught son, but her husband cut her off. "What?! What?! Tell me what you feel!"

The room relapsed into sudden silence, and Neil felt paralyzed. He hadn't expected to actually be offered the opportunity, but now that it was on him, he had no idea what he would say. There was so much- *I'm trapped, I want to act, I don't think I'll ever be good enough for you, I'm in love with Todd-* and he wasn't sure he could get any of it out. Especially the bit about Todd.

"What is it?!" His father demanded. "What do you feel?"

Nothing, Neil felt on the tip of his tongue, pressed on his lips. Which reminded him of Todd, of his sweet breath and soft confession.

I hope tonight is everything you dreamed of. I hope it's perfect. Because then you'll know it was worth all the trouble, and I will be so happy for you.

His expression softened as he thought of it, until he was nearly smiling. "Happy," He whispered despite himself. He wasn't even sure where they thought had come from.

"What?"

I can't spend forever wondering what might have happened if for once in my life, I was brave enough to say something.

He met his father's piercing gaze head-on. "I'm… happy. I am, for once in my life, *happy* . Because it doesn't matter anymore." He laughed peculiarly. "You can send me to military school, you can dictate my life, and it… won't matter. I don't care anymore. Because I know, for sure. I *know* I don't want to be a doctor, I *know* I don't want to go to Harvard. I like acting. And I'm *good.* Mom, I was really good," He turned to her then right back. "I don't have to wonder anymore: what if I had done it? I *know* now." Another laugh. "I'm all stirred up."

This shocked them all into silence again, and Tom Perry stared at his son, almost taller than him now, and getting stockier in build, with his lopsided grin and single dimple, and, for maybe the first time in Neil's whole life, Tom saw a *person.*

His son. Neil. Not an extension of Tom, not a redo. Not a project or a burden or anything of the sort. Just an almost-man, looking at his father and begging him to understand.

"Neil," he mumbled.

"Father."

He swallowed resolutely. "Okay."

This was met with silence again, until Neil was brave enough to ask, "What… what do you mean?"

"Okay. You don't want to be a doctor. Acting makes you happy. Okay. Then we'll work something out. A compromise between us. It's your life; you ought to have some input."

Neil's eyes got wide. "But… really? You…" He looked anxiously to his mother, who seemed just as surprised. "I don't know what to say."

"You can start by apologizing to your mother. Scared her half to death."

"Yeah," Neil mumbled. "Yeah, I'm, I'm so sorry, Mom. I won't do it again."

She smiled wetly, nodding in acknowledgment.

"Alright. We'll discuss this in the morning. Let's go to bed," Tom decided, taking his hat off the desk and taking a step toward the door. He didn't get any further, however, because Neil jumped toward him,

in a strained, but rather genuine hug.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

“Mm.” He said, but Neil knew what he meant.

I love you, Neil.

Todd was lying on his side. He was waiting for the moment he knew was coming, when the door would creak open and Charlie would come with those tragic two words.

Neil’s dead.

It came sooner than he expected, and he didn’t bother to sit up or look over. “Already?” He whispered miserably.

The door closed softly. Charlie stepped gently to not wake him, which was stupid, because he should’ve known Todd would do anything but sleep.

“Hey, you.”

Todd shoved up on his hands in surprise. He stared at the figure in front of him, chest heaving, overwhelmed with something too strong to describe.

“Neil?”

He grinned, bright enough to light up the entirely dark room.

He shucked off his coat and threw it on the desk chair, kicking off his shoes beneath his bed, and kneeled next to Todd’s bed. “Were you crying? What’s wrong?” He reached up to rub softly at the stained tear-track on his pale skin.

Todd laughed incredulously. “I didn’t think you were coming back.”

“Me neither,” He made a face. “But here I am.”

Todd smoothed Neil’s snow-soaked hair back from his forehead. “But… but, I thought… but your father…”

“Yeah, I know. He was furious. Said he was going to put me in military school.” He grimaced. “Could you imagine? But I just… I told

him the truth. I don't know, I've never been that brave in my life with him, but… it was weird. It was like he could see I have feelings suddenly? I really," He shrugged, obviously at a loss. "He's gonna let me stay at Welton until graduation, and in the meantime, we're gonna talk about what I'm going to do. And he's going to compromise with me."

"That's amazing," Todd gasped in disbelief. "That's… you're not trapped anymore."

"No!" Neil beamed, "I'm not! I've never felt this free in my life."

"I'm *so* happy for you."

"Well, I couldn't have done it without you. You stir me up."

Todd got the urge again, the one he'd had before, to lean down and kiss the soft spot between Neil's eyebrows. Except this time, he really did.

Neil's eyelids fluttered the way he thought they would, pink dusting his cheekbones. "What was that for?"

Todd couldn't stop his grin. "I think you're beautiful."

Waking up was incredibly difficult. Todd squinted against the early light, trying to hide himself back under the comforter and stop morning from coming. He rolled over, and the arm around his waist tightened to pull him in closer. Neil groaned softly and pulled the sheets over his head too.

Todd's eyes shot open.

His face was less than an inch from Neil's, who was still mostly asleep, enveloped in a sort of amber glow from the way the light seeped through the layers. Their legs were tangled disastrously, so it was hard to tell who was who and Todd was sweaty but warm in a way it was nearly impossible to get at Welton.

It was perfect.

He thought of the afternoon in the hotel, but this was… different. That had been stolen and rushed and… artificial. It had happened by choice, of course, but there was some level of orchestration to it, and

it ended too quickly, like a dream you wanted to explore but couldn't quite remember the morning after.

This was better.

Neil mumbled something that sounded vaguely like Todd's name and Todd hummed in response, leaning in closer so their lips barely brushed. The ghost of a kiss whispered between them.

His eyebrows tensed up, almost with concern, although he didn't open his eyes, instead tipping his head to meet Todd again, firmer this time, and instantly relaxed again.

Todd smiled lethargically, kissing the corner of his mouth, the curve of his cheekbone, the bridge of his nose, the top of his eyelid just below his eyebrow. The side of his chin, and under his jaw, and against his throat, and the side of his neck. Anywhere Todd could reach without lifting his head much, until Neil whined softly and tugged on his shirt so he would return to his lips.

They moved slowly, sleepy morning-breath kisses. It was more fluid than the night before; they'd needed a moment to figure it out, but now they had and it was easier than breathing. The touches lingered, silent, profound poetry in and of itself, and ironically, Todd thought of Walt Whitman.

I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell.

This must be it, his divine things. Todd understood perfectly now. This was exactly the kind of thing that made you want to create things.

He quickly tried to purge the thought of Whitman because nothing kills a moment like a deranged artist.

It *was* a divine moment, however, and could've stretched on for a good long while without any sense of boredom if not for Charlie, seeming to sense the peace and keep in line with his desperate desire for destroying it, flung the door open.

"Now, listen, Todd," He started harshly. "I've been up all night, and I've been working out a new plan, and I know you're upset and your heart is broken, or whatever, and you want to give up, but you can't! Okay?! Because Neil is like a brother to me, and, and I *will not* give up on him. I have the chance to save him, *we* have the chance, and we're not going to waste it. Because we owe it to Neil, and to ourselves. So get up, come talk to me, and we'll get to the dock before breakfast to

try again!”

Todd pulled back from Neil slowly, bottom lip still caught between his and drawn out in aching space before they fully separated, and he pulled back the comforter and stuck his head out. “Charlie,” He mumbled sluggishly. “‘T’s okay. We’re fine.”

“No! Just- just stop it! Neil is *not* a lost cause, and I won’t let you treat him like he is, so we’re going to figure this out. I don’t care if it’s Tuesday for the rest of our lives- We are DOING THIS!”

Todd, despite himself, huffed a laugh, peering at Charlie’s frazzled demeanor. His hair was parted the wrong way, and his eyes were so red they hurt to look at. He felt a little bad for not coming to tell him, especially when he was so clearly worked up, but also he was totally ruining Neil’s and his soft morning, so he didn’t feel too bad.

Neil pulled impatiently on Todd’s side, trying to force him to lay back down, and Todd didn’t need to be told twice. “Everything’s fine,” He murmured, falling back on the pillows and curling in toward Neil.

“No! Nothing’s fine! Neil is gone, and I don’t care how sad you are-”

“Charlie!” Neil gasped finally, sitting up. “What are you even talking about? It’s too early for your bullshit. Go back to bed.”

“No, because-” His argument died on his lips. “Neil?”

“Told you it was fine,” Todd slurred languidly.

“Neil, you’re… but- I thought- Todd, you said… When did you go to the dock? I… Oh my God, I remembered this time? I remember everything from last time! Todd, this is-”

Well, so much for going back to sleep.

“It’s Wednesday, Charlie,” Todd said.

He stared at Neil like he was a ghost. “What do you mean?”

“It’s Wednesday.”

“You mean… but, that means…”

Todd grinned. “We did it.”

“Oh, thank God!” Charlie cried. “Oh, Neil, you’re a sight for sore eyes!

I've never been so happy to see your dopey bedhead in my whole life!" He threw himself onto the bed, wedged in between Todd and Neil, which was a feat, given they were already impossibly close to each other, to throw his arms around Neil.

"Okay, we were lucky to get the two of us on this thing, there is *not* room for you too," Neil laughed, swatting at him.

"Sure there is!" He rolled his eyes. "So, so what? So you got a boyfriend and now all your problems are solved?"

Neil flushed, and so did Todd. "No!" Neil protested. "That's not… There's still a lot to be worked out, but… I don't know. He just… said the right thing. To help me solve my own problems. It's easier to do difficult things when you're reminded you're not alone."

Todd agreed. That was the only reason he didn't manhandle Charlie onto the floor right then.

He started to scramble off of his own volition, shouting that he had to go tell the others, and for once, in a very, very long time, Todd was glad to see the morning of December 16th.

April came quickly, stumbling through the bleakness of winter and tripping into warmer weather, blue skies, and green grass. It was a beautiful thing, when the flowers on the Welton grounds came through, and the sunsets stretched later into the evening. The boys started playing soccer again, and the lake started to thaw its endless plateau of ice.

It rained the entire week before Neil's birthday, but by the time the day actually rolled around, there was not a single cloud in the sky. It was warm enough that the typical layer of mud that built up around the school had dried out, and everyone was eager to get out of the dark, dreary building and into the golden glow of the spring.

Todd and Charlie ducked into the cave, where the others already waited. They yawped at their arrival, clapping emphatically and clearing out to the edges so they could trip through.

“We come bearing gifts!” Charlie exclaimed, practically falling into his spot between Knox and Meeks, and pushing his sunglasses up on his head.

Todd produced the white cardboard bakery box dramatically, which was met with more excitement. Neil lit up. “Oh, Todd! I told you not to go crazy.”

“I didn’t!” He defended simply. He really didn’t. He was just fulfilling a promise from a long, long time ago.

He and Pitts positioned the cake in a relatively level spot on the cave floor and opened up the spoils of his and Charlie’s outing.

Inside, was a chocolate cake- with raspberry filling- and yellow and white buttercream to hold the fairy ring of maraschino cherries. Knox put up a fuss that they didn’t have any candles, so Charlie flicked on his lighter and held it above the cake for Neil to blow out after their terrible, off-key rendition of *Happy Birthday*.

They didn’t bother cutting the cake, just passing out forks and everyone tearing in, talking amongst themselves.

“Good choice,” Neil declared through a mouthful of chocolate.

Todd almost said, *You liked it last time,* but didn’t. There was no point. That was a lifetime ago. Those were different boys eating the same cake on the floor of the library.

Instead, he grinned, and leaned in, resting his head on Neil’s shoulder.

When the cake had been picked over, and Meeks proved he was the only one of them who could tie a knot in a cherry stem with his tongue, and Knox and Neil had successfully scraped out every last ounce of the raspberry jam until there was nothing but thin streaks in the box and a handful of crumbs Charlie was sticking to his thumb and licking off, they leaned in to start the meeting.

Neil had slid down to be closer to the cake, and now rested against Todd’s chest, tucked between his legs, just the right height that Todd could rest his chin on the crown of his head.

“So who’s going first?” Charlie asked, kicking back to light a cigarette. “Care to grace us with *Ode To Chris* , Knoxious?”

Knox rolled his eyes. “As if you’ve never had a hopeless crush on someone ever, in your life.”

Charlie smirked, and Todd watched the exchange knowingly. He’d been working on that, and it seemed to be getting closer. Knox deciding sometime mid-February that he was over Chris had helped.

“I’ll do it,” Meeks said. “Pass me the book, Neil.”

“Blue or green?”

“Blue.”

He picked up both anyway, handing *Five Centuries of Verse* to him, and lifting The Bible to Todd. Keating had noticed how attached he was to it and decided to dedicate it to the cause. At this point, Todd knew it better than the actual bible.

Todd took the book. He thumbed through it vaguely, looking for a good line for this moment. He still didn’t read at meetings, but sometimes he would look through the books, and point things out to Neil anyway.

Meeks stood up and cleared his throat to start off on a contribution by Byron, and the poets listened, half-heartedly. The weather had amped them up, and after spending so long confined, they ached to get out and *do something,* and listening to poetry was very much not that right now. So when Charlie started to antagonize Knox enough to cause a distraction, which ended with Knox tumbling out of the cave to get away while Charlie chased after him, the boys followed.

“Did your parents send you a present?” Todd asked, jogging down the hill through the budding trees.

“Yeah, it’s on my desk. I haven’t opened it yet, but it’s *book-shaped,* so,” Neil laughed. “I’ll bet it’s another tragic history my father wants me to read.”

“Better than a desk set?”

“Definitely.” He nodded adamantly. “I don’t mind too much, really. He’s trying really hard to connect with me, and it’s… it’s kind of nice, I guess.”

As the plan stood, when the boys graduated from Welton Academy- not this May but the next- Neil would be attending Harvard to study

English Literature, with an emphasis on theatrical works. It took Tom a little while to warm up to the idea of his son being anything but a doctor, but now he had mostly, if not fully, embraced academia and dedicated his time to making sure Neil was prepared. And most importantly, he had become more or less reasonable. Neil was even lined up to attend tryouts for a summer production of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Todd hadn't thought that far ahead yet. He just needed to pass his trigonometry final in two weeks.

Neil ran ahead to poke fun at Charlie, who had absolutely tripped and ate it in the grass, and was now rolling around to make it seem like it had been his plan all along. He had grass stains on his sleeves and was most definitely going to be chewed out about it, but the freedom from the endless winter was too fantastic to be dampened by things like a talking-to from Hager.

Eventually, the clan made it out past the brink of the woods and down beyond the dip near the lacrosse field, bounding on toward the shimmering lake. To the dock.

Knox, Charlie, and Meeks all sprinted toward the water's edge with no reservations, Pitts and Neil hot on their heels, but Todd lingered. He stood at the end of the dock, hands in his pockets, watching fondly. Contentedly.

"Come on!" Neil called.

"I… I'd rather not."

"Why not?"

Charlie and Meeks were shoving at each other, playing chicken on the very edge, until Meeks slipped and started to fall head over heels into the water, but managed to grab Charlie's tie, which did nothing except yank Charlie forward so they both tumbled in at the same moment.

"That's why," Todd chuckled.

Knox howled with laughter, peering over their soaking forms, and at the same moment, both of them surged forward and grabbed his ankles, sweeping his feet out so he had no choice but to follow them right in.

Pitts stripped off his socks, shoes, and watch, setting them aside on the

grass, and dove in, because if they were doing it, *all of them* were doing it.

“Come on!” Neil beckoned again, hands on his hips as he stood out on the edge looking back to Todd. “What do you think’s gonna happen?

He wasn’t sure; he’d steered clear of the dock since December, afraid that he could accidentally lose this perfect timeline if he dared cross the threshold.

They hadn’t told Neil everything about what transpired in December, just enough to get him to stop asking too many questions about it. There was too much to tell, and no point to. All those weeks when Neil wasn’t happy were nothing compared to this time, when he was.

“Yeah, come on, Todd!” Charlie hollered, trying to shove Knox off his shoulders. “It’s his birthday! You have to do what he says!”

Todd rolled his eyes but found himself kicking off his shoes anyway. So what? So what if everything restarted? He knew how to get them out of it, and then it would just be more time with his friends. With Neil.

He loosened his tie and left it with his socks, bare feet on the warm wood of the dock as he crossed to Neil. Neil beamed. “Hey, you.”

“Hi,” Todd leaned over him, and blindly their hands found each other. “How are you, Mr. Whitman?”

“Oh, I’m *so* good, Mr. Whitman,” Neil laughed softly. “I love this.”

“What?” Todd murmured. “Me?”

“Yeah. Yeah, you.”

They met each other in the kiss, soft and warm in the sun, and the poets erupted into various degrees of disgust, splashing lake water at them with as much force as they could, until Neil started to lean in their direction, and sent both he and Todd veering in.

Todd’s breath disappeared from his lungs as he hit the surface, ready to wake up in bed at any moment, eyes scrunched closed. But the seconds ticked away and he was met only with a mouthful of lake water, cold and bitter and fantastic. He pushed on the sandy bottom with his toes to break back into the air, gasping for breath.

Neil laughed, pushing his soaked hair from his eyes, and throwing his arms around his neck.

Todd tipped his head back to savor the moment, basking in the sun refracting from the water droplets on Neil's eyelashes, and the only thing that came to mind was the Whitman quote he *would've* shown him if the meeting had gone on any longer.

I have loved many… but I love none better than you.

Chapter End Notes

And so ends the tragic, but ultimately rewarding, tale of the Todd and the damned Meatloop.

I can't believe it's over! I'm genuinely grieving a little bit. This was such a big project for me and such an exploratory piece of my writing, and I really can't emphasize how much this silly little fic changed me, my techniques, and my skills. It's really a testament that there is something profound in even the strangest of places.

I would once again like to thank all my sweet friends who helped me with this- especially my long-suffering and endlessly patient roommates who had to put up with my insane brainrot and dry-erase madness on the communal fridge- and all of you lovely readers who reached out to tell me how much you appreciated my work and really helped me get through what could've easily been a really hard time for me. I adore you all so much, and I can't properly convey how grateful I am that you were willing to come all this way with me!

I have much to do with these boys, and for my next project, I'll be starting my Teen-Dad Charlie fic- A is for Alice- that will probably find its way to you in the next few weeks! I'm so excited to see where my passion for Dead Poets will take me and I'd be thrilled if you want to come with me.

Signing off from the Meatloop for the last time,
The Pirate
Happy Meatloop Monday to you all!! <33

End Notes

Comments and kudos always appreciated

Stay safe y'all <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!